THE JOY OF FORAGING

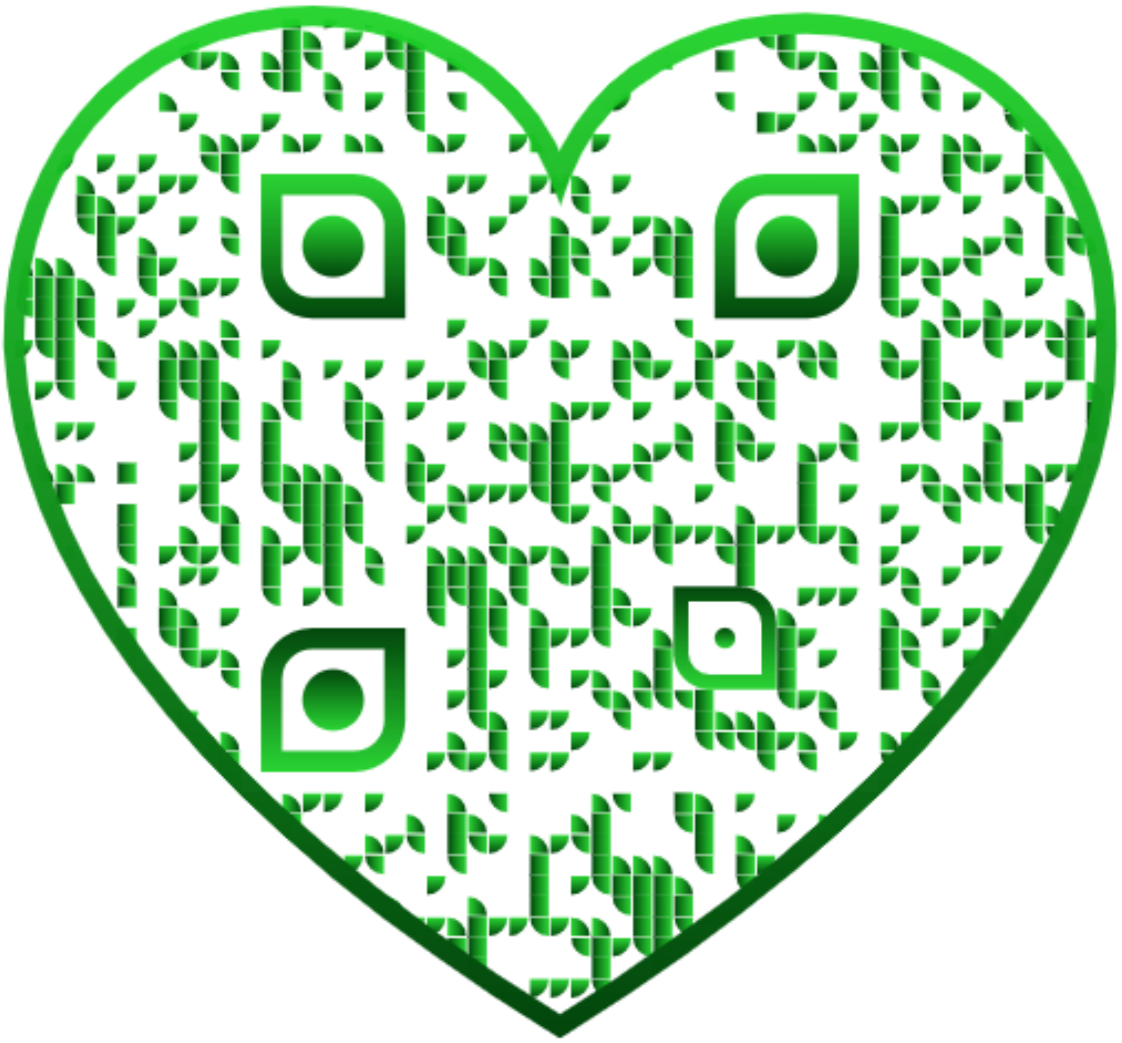
Gary Lincoff's Illustrated Guide to Finding, Harvesting, and Enjoying a World of Wild Food

GARY LINCOFF

Author of *The Complete Mushroom Hunter*

Selected photography by Chie Nishio

QUARRY



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◀ Wild leek (ramps) flowers and bulbs

This guide is dedicated to my wife, Irene,
who has been my guide in exploring
this endlessly fascinating and pleasurable
world of foraging for edible wild plants.

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INTRODUCTION

HOW AND WHY THIS BOOK IS UNIQUE

One early July afternoon my wife and I were hiking along a narrow trail in a sun-drenched area of ponds and low thickets about two hours north of New York City. We were becoming dehydrated when we discovered the trail led through a dense patch of blueberries. We descended on them, more to relieve our thirst than anything, but soon we were sitting in among them eating and picking at the same time, and we were filling the containers we had brought along, just in case we found something edible to collect.

A Boy Scout troop came by and we cleared the path of our daypacks for them to pass. The scout leader was visibly annoyed. "What do you think you're doing?" he asked. We told him, simply, that we were picking blueberries. He told the scouts to pay no attention to us and to move along. He then turned to us and told us that if he wanted blueberries he'd buy them in the supermarket, and that we should know better than to behave like this in front of the children.

I was a scout when I was a boy. I still have the *Handbook for Boys* manual published by the Boy Scouts of America. It was printed in 1955, and it says that more than 14 million copies of it and earlier editions had been printed since 1910. This manual illustrates some 30 edible wild plants, and mentions more than 60 different kinds. It gives instructions on how to cook these edible wild plants, and even how to do it on camping trips.

During the Great Depression a cookbook was published in the U.S. that became a classic for decades. *The Joy of Cooking* was something many young brides were given so that alone in their new kitchens they could cook up a storm, creating an endless variety of tasty dishes. Included in the book were recipes for cream of nettle soup; instructions for using dandelion, sheep sorrel, and wintercress; and ways to use more than a dozen wild and exotic fruits, including elderberry, pawpaw, persimmon, and prickly pear. It's unlikely that many urban dwellers noticed these recipes or had market access to these plants. That they could forage their own wild plants was not a skill they likely acquired at home or in school.

What the world's rural peoples have long known about their local, edible wild plants is very slowly making its way into urban centers. Wild foods, such as fiddlehead ferns, ramps (wild leeks), and glasswort (called sea beans in some markets) are showing up in farmers' markets now, and on the shelves of upscale groceries. Fresh mangosteens, rambutans, even durians, can be seen in Asian groceries everywhere large Asian communities now live.

The Joy of Foraging, unlike other guides on foraging for edible wild plants, begins its lessons in your kitchen, where a number of edible wild plants may be hidden in plain sight. We then travel to local markets, farmers' markets, and ethnic markets to see what's available for sale where the risk in misidentifying a plant is reduced, or at least where the vendor is trusted to sell what the product is labeled to be.

Onward then to restaurants, especially those that offer foods or dishes that you're not likely to consider replicating at home. Some cities have a wealth of foreign cuisines to choose from, and you may find unusual plant foods in restaurants while traveling domestically and abroad.

Four wild fruits in Bali: Salak (*Salacca edulis*, a palm fruit); top right: Rambutan (*Nephelium lappaceum*)—common now in Asian markets worldwide; bottom left: Tamarillo or Tree Tomato (*Solanum betaceum*); bottom right: Mangosteen (*Garcinia mangostana*)—odds-on favorite for being the most-loved fruit of many people in the world (even though few Americans have ever heard of it. Mangosteen is now being sold fresh in season—summer—in Chinese markets.)

Only then do we take you outdoors—first to your lawn, backyard, and local streets, mostly to observe and learn rather than collect. Then we take a walk through an open park, followed by a wooded parkland area, then a wetland area, then along a seashore.

This way, step by step, locale by locale, plant by plant, you learn to connect what you already know to what you're observing. Wild plants become known in context, and become "tamed" by becoming known, named, understood, and then used (or eaten). In this way, the "wildness" of edible wild plants is demystified, as the plants become an extended part of what you already know about the plant foods you use every day.

The Joy of Foraging offers the following:

- An introduction to some of the most common and widely distributed edible plants
- Instructions on how to identify them accurately
- Guidance about how to collect, use, and preserve the edible parts of these plants, whether those are shoots, stems, leaves, buds, flowers, fruits, seeds, or roots
- Recipes for salads, cooked greens, soups, sauces, root vegetables, jellies and jams, ices, fruit pastes, pickles, teas, fruit drinks, seasonings, and flours for making breads and cakes

A Note on the Meaning of "Wild"

What does the word *wild* in the subtitle of this book mean? Wild means any plant that has not been modified in some way by cultivation. Wild plants can be grown and harvested, as is done in traditional societies around the world where little or no distinction is made between wild and cultivated plants. No Amazon village is complete without its fruit trees that are simply taken from the forest and planted in the village for convenient harvesting. These plants are no less wild for being transported by people from one place to another.

CHAPTER 1

EDIBLE WILD PLANTS: THE WHAT AND THE WHO

"Whosoever eats sour grapes, his teeth shall be set on edge."
—Jeremiah 31:30

You don't need to go back to the Bible to find opinions about plants. More than enough can be gleaned around your dinner table. My father wouldn't eat salads; he called them "rabbit food." My son, until he was in high school, like most of his friends, thought French fries were the only "vegetable" worth eating. In fact, many kids I have known over time ate only the basic foods: pizza, cheeseburgers, fries, and popcorn. Some ate peanut butter and jelly, but not nearly as many kids as did when I was growing up.

Every parent who tries to feed spinach to his or her kids has to cope with what one might call the Clarence Darrow attitude: "I don't like spinach, and I'm glad I don't, because if I liked it I'd eat it, and I just hate it." The circular wit works for all ages.

Are there any such strong opinions out there about meat (aside from those held by vegetarians and vegans)? If so, they're nothing like the resentments people have developed about plants.

◀ Fresh chestnuts covered in their spiny green fruit.

I WILL NOT EAT . . .

Some people won't eat their vegetables—or anything green. Some won't eat anything raw, while others won't eat anything cooked, fearing all the goodness is lost in the cooking.

I have friends who won't eat watercress because it's too pungent; others feel the same way about arugula and most sharp-tasting mustard greens. There's a divide between those who love cilantro and those who loathe it.

Sometimes an aversion begins as a smell that "sets someone's teeth on edge": We all know that onions and garlic can be oppressive in close quarters.

While some people won't eat brussels sprouts because of their smell, tens of millions of people love durian, an Asian fruit that smells like rotting garbage! Ginkgo fruits are a close second on the rank scale, and wherever ginkgo trees are planted in urban areas where there's a local Asian population, there are people out there collecting them.

I have too many friends who can't stand spicy foods or anything with jalapeño peppers in it, while others ask waiters to be sure the dish is spicy hot. And then there are beets. Some people love them, and others complain that they're too earthy, that they taste like dirt. What edible wild plant has as bad a reputation as beets?

WILD TASTES, WILDER FLAVORS

What sets your teeth on edge? What foods are too bitter for you to eat? Is there any wild food as bitter as bitter melon, an immensely popular food in Asia that is sold in almost every Asian market?

What's too sour for you to eat? Is there any wild food as sour as, say, tamarind, which is used in Asian cuisines to add sourness to a dish?

What's too pungent for you to eat? Is there any wild food as pungent as Szechuan peppercorns? It's a spice in a world of its own: It causes an appealing numbness to those who can appreciate it.

> Parisians are said to love shallots in part to distinguish themselves from the rest of France where, they say, the "garlic-eaters" live.

Name an edible wild fruit that you find too sour (e.g., cranberries) or too astringent (e.g., persimmons) or too sickly sweet (e.g., some white mulberries), and they're nothing compared to what is readily available in markets around the world.

And what about texture? Some people won't eat okra because of its texture, but texture is more a matter of culture than a specieswide preference. The Japanese adore something they call mountain potato (*yama no imo*), a kind of yam that, when cooked, presents the diner with a bowl of something so slimy that it can't be lifted with chopsticks or any known implement: The diner brings the bowl close to his mouth and pushes and sucks the food in!

Take heart: No edible wild plant in this book presents any challenge remotely similar.

In fact, the edible wild plants included in this guide, with very few exceptions, are as user-friendly as plants can be: There's nothing here that can't be served to an aged relative.

That said, there's no guarantee that any edible wild plants, except for a few berries, will really appeal to young people—that is to say, they will be picked by kids to eat when no grownups are around!

Traditional Societies and Wild Food

If you walk around urban areas people-watching, it's not hard to see that some people are picking plants along city streets and in city parks. It's astonishing how many plants are known and used by new immigrants—plants whose edibility is quite unknown to the residents born in that country.

Ginkgo being picked

Man in Kamchatka holding a Ginseng plant

Traditional "Roots" around the World

The most conspicuous immigrant group of these (in northern U.S. cities) is the Chinese. During autumn, when the planted ginkgo trees drop their smelly fruits, Chinese people collect the ginkgo nuts. It seems that whole families are engaged in this pursuit, and that particular trees are "owned" by individual families. Because the fruits smell so bad, people usually wear gloves as they collect ginkgo nuts. Sometimes these are cleaned on the spot, other times people take home large bags full of the fallen fruits. Once home, the smelly outer covering is removed and the nut is cracked open to free the seed. The seed is the "ginkgo nut" found in Chinese restaurants and sold canned in Chinese markets. Ginkgo nuts are also used as a Chinese New Year's ritual food.

Chinese people also gather the greens of a nightshade plant called matrimony vine (*Lycium halimifolium*), which are sold by street vendors in Chinatowns. The leaves are used as a potherb and dried for a tea. A very similar plant is called wolfberry or goji berry (*Lycium barbarum*), which is valued for its antioxidant properties and now appears in a variety of food products, including chocolate bars.

Another Chinese favorite is an ornamental shrub in the same family as ginseng. *Acanthopanax sieboldianus* is "pruned" by people who take bagfuls of it out of city parks to make a medicinal tea. Ginseng, sometimes called *sang* or *seng* for short, was one of the most sought-after edible wild plants in the United States in the early nineteenth century, when frontiersman Daniel Boone made his fortune as a "sanger," collecting tons of ginseng roots to ship to China. Now, because of overharvesting, it's scarce where it used to grow wild and its location a secret to everyone but those who know where to find it.

In the U.S. state of Wisconsin, ginseng is intensively farmed: 1.5 million pounds are dried and sold to Chinese markets in the United States and many Asian countries. Korean ginseng, not quite its equal in quality, is found and grown in parts of Asia and the Russian Far East.

A Korean woman was picking aster leaves in a big city park. I asked her what she was doing, but she spoke no English and just indicated that the leaves were something she ate. A Korean aster, *Aster koraiensis*, is a popular edible in Korea. Apparently, young aster leaves are edible, though this might not apply to all species in the genus *Aster*.

Lulo is a lemon-flavored fruit kids love in the Amazon.

Japanese people are avid for fiddlehead ferns, and even have spring festivals to celebrate the bracken fern (*Pteridium aquilinum*). While used many ways in different countries, it is known to contain carcinogens. It is a popular edible in Japan, China, and Korea, but it is suspected of causing stomach cancer in Japan (though it is nevertheless still consumed there).

Tourists from Europe and Asia are fascinated by finding edible wild plants wherever they are visiting in the United States. Hispanic peoples pick and use plants they recognize from their home countries, plants such as Mexican tea (*Dysphania ambrosioides*). And some people gather dandelion greens and other greens they remember collecting as children in the country of their birth.

North America

More than five hundred tribes of Native American peoples populated the land now known as the United States. One thing they all had in common was a profound knowledge of their local plants. These peoples lived on a primarily plant-based diet. Before they cultivated corn, they gathered all their plant foods from the wild, and they had a vast array of plant foods to choose among. Depending on where they lived, acorns or wild rice provided a staple food, and everything they needed from sweet (maple sap) to sour (some fruits) to salty (seashore greens) foods could be harvested from the wild.

Trees that modern people barely notice were sources of food (including honey), medicine, clothing, shelter, boats, and tools. The "tree of life" is not just a metaphor for traditional societies. The canoe

Annatto, commonly used to color rice in *arroz con pollo*

or white birch (*Betula papyrifera*) was essential to the success of northeastern and north-central North American tribes, where it could be used to make canoes, shelters, containers (even for boiling liquids), and medicines, as a syrup from the boiled sap—even bark to write on, and so on. Nearly every part of the world has a distinctive "tree of life" that traditional peoples found and learned to exploit.

South America

A typical Amazonian village is constructed like an open-air market, where the foods are still growing on plants that line the paths between buildings. When ripe, the lulo (*Solanum quitoense*), a small, orange, very sour fruit in the Nightshade family, is constantly being visited by kids. (It's also sold fresh and as a frozen pulp in many Hispanic markets.) Uvilla (*Pourouma cecropifolia*), a grapelike cluster of fruits in the Nettle family, is never far away.

Achiote or annatto (*Bixa orellana*) is used both as a food dye (sold in markets to color rice in dishes like arroz con pollo) and as a body paint; the dye is easily made and applied to faces and chests during ritual dances, such as those at a harvest festival.

Perhaps the best-tasting wild food is heart of palm. One or another of a number of palm trees, such as *Euterpe edulis*, is ubiquitous in the Amazon basin. The young tree is cut down and peeled to expose the central, soft, fleshy core. This is also harvested commercially and sold canned, as well as flown fresh to upscale restaurants in other countries, where it is served in expensive heart of palm salad.

Other common wild foods in this same village include different species of the chocolate tree

THE WORLD OF WILD STAPLES

If fruits are the sweet treats of the world, what are the staples that make everyday life possible? In North America, acorn harvesting and processing slowly gave way to corn once corn was not only cultivated, but also improved dramatically—it would take many "ears" of the original corn to make just one today. In regions of the world where grains such as corn, wheat, rice, rye, and barley cannot be grown, other staples had to be found. In tropical South America, for example, cassava or yuca, a root vegetable and a very bitter and toxic form of this plant, is cultivated and processed as the Amazonian daily bread (or porridge). (There is also a less bitter form of the same plant sold in Hispanic markets and is also marketed as tapioca.)

In Papua New Guinea, the staple food is the pith of the sago palm. In Southern Africa, the bushmen who live in the Kalahari Desert have never farmed and have gathered all their food from the wild for forty thousand years. Their staples have been a number of wild tubers, beans, and berries, and even a desert truffle.

There are hunter-gatherer peoples today scattered throughout developing and undeveloped countries, small bands of people who primarily depend on edible wild plants to sustain them and their children, much as people did half a million years ago.

Eating the pulp of the fruit of a wild "chocolate" tree

(*Theobroma*), which have pods that are picked off the tree, cut open, and their pulp eaten neat. It can be sweet, but there is no chocolate flavor to this fruit because what we know as chocolate is a processed food that uses the seeds, not the pulp.

At least a dozen other plants in the village are used as medicinal plants, all brought into the village and grown there, so the village has, as it were, a living drugstore to visit as the need arises.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: **Euell Gibbons collecting wild horseradish; collecting wineberries; collecting wild watercress; collecting stinging nettle**

EQUIPMENT AND TOOLS FOR WORKING WITH WILD EDIBLES

To gather, use, and preserve edible wild plants, you need some of the following tools and equipment.

In the Field

- A knife
- Scissors
- A garden trowel
- Pruning shears
- Collecting containers with flat bottoms and tight-fitting lids
- Ziplock plastic bags (several sizes)
- Garden or kitchen gloves

At Home

- Canning jars and lids (several sizes) for making jams and storing foods
- Large pots (several sizes) for sterilizing jars, making jams, etc.
- A cherry pitter
- Sugar (have at least five pounds [2 kg] on hand when you're working with wild plants)
- Good vinegar for making pickles
- An electric food dehydrator with stacking trays for drying fruits and leaves

Other tools and objects can be helpful, depending on the task and what outcome is wanted. For example, a flat, open basket can be useful for shaking fruit to separate dry seeds from their enclosures. A small, inexpensive ice-cream maker makes iced desserts easy to do.

OVERHARVESTING AND SUSTAINABILITY

Any plant that is harvested by its roots can be overharvested. Ginseng, once a common plant in eastern North America, is now scarce. Ramps, or wild leeks, while abundant in some areas in the southeastern United States is considered endangered in Quebec, and it can be collected there only for personal consumption (not for sale or use in restaurants). Maintaining sustainable harvesting of edible wild plants depends on the part harvested as well as the demand for it. A plant that becomes celebrated in the media and that is in high demand among upscale restaurant chefs can be collected inappropriately by wild crafters and threatened with local eradication.

Misidentification of look-alikes, such as the common dandelion and the endangered California dandelion, can result in the loss of a protected wildflower. Some localities have laws prohibiting the collecting of certain plants, such as ferns and orchids, because they have been overharvested for years.

Collecting berries, nuts, seeds, flowers, and leaves doesn't present the same level of threat to the sustainability of such plants. Still, when shown an endless expanse of one edible wild plant or another, it's hard to imagine how such abundance could become endangered. That's what people used to think about the Amazon basin until it became so intensively and extensively developed.

WHAT EDIBLE WILD PLANTS ARE *NOT* IN THIS BOOK (AND WHY)

Plants that are edible but not included in this book fall into two categories:

- Wildflowers that have edible underground parts. These include such seemingly abundant wildflowers as trout lily (*Erythronium americanum*), the beautiful, fragile spring beauty (*Claytonia virginica*), and often overlooked woodland wildflowers such as wild ginger (*Asarum canadense*). It wouldn't take many foragers very long to severely diminish the populations of these wildflowers.

- Plant families with wild edibles that also include a number of toxic, even deadly look-alikes:

  Carrot family (Apiaceae). This family includes carrots, celery, parsnips, parsley, and dill, and a number of tasty wild plants, such as wild carrot or Queen Anne's lace (*Daucus carota*). When in flower, especially in late summer, Queen Anne's lace can be seen along roadsides from the Pacific Ocean, across the vast Russian landmass, across Europe, and across North America. While it is edible, it does have a deadly look-alike: poison hemlock (*Conium maculatum*). Almost every edible plant in the Carrot family has a poisonous look-alike. If that weren't bad enough, several edibles in the family, plants that can be reliably identified, such as wild parsnip (*Pastinaca sativa*), are known to cause a blistering dermatitis (i.e., phytophotodermatitis) when the plants are collected on a sunny day and the juices in the plants get on one's hands or arms. The discoloring, blistering, rashlike effect can be painful and last for weeks. Not everyone is susceptible, but it's not worth the risk to find out if you are.

Poison ivy spring leaves

Buttercup family (Ranunculaceae). Some of its plants, like monkshood or wolfsbane (*Aconitum sp.*), can cause a life-threatening poisoning.

Nightshade family (Solanaceae). While this family offers us a number of important food plants, including potatoes, tomatoes, peppers (bell and chili), and eggplant, too many of the wild plants cause serious poisonings: the European deadly nightshade (*Atropa belladonna*), mandrake root (*Mandragora officinarum*), and jimsonweed (*Datura stramonium*), to name just three. Ground cherry is a nightshade included in this book because its fruit is unmistakable, safe, and delicious.

Plant Poisons and Plant Poisonings

Plants produce poisons to protect themselves against predators. Even many of our choice edible plants, including apples and cherries, have toxins in some plant part or other. We eat apples but not apple seeds. We can make a tea from dried cherry leaves but not from wilted cherry leaves. So what are the poisonous plants we need to know about? How are they poisonous, and who has used them and for what purpose, good or ill?

Some plants are poisonous to touch. The three poison ivy–like plants (poison ivy, poison oak, and poison sumac) can produce a mild to severe rash on the skin of susceptible individuals. A number of plants cause a physical injury. For example, Arum family plants should not be ingested without first boiling out their calcium oxalate crystals, because

Rope-like poison ivy growing up a tree

Poison oak

Poison oak

otherwise they will inflame mucous membranes in your mouth. Stinging nettles produce a rash-like irritation if touched, but nothing dangerous or long lasting. Plants with prickles or thorns, like rose bushes, blackberries, and hawthorn, can pierce the skin and cause an infection requiring treatment.

Internal poisoning from eating plants is the main concern. In tropical regions, there is a popular edible wild plant called akee that, if not eaten at the right stage of ripeness, can be fatal.

Examples like this could discourage anyone from eating wild plants, but akee is an exception.

Some plants are known by traditional societies to be dangerously poisonous, and some of these can be used to great deliberate effect. Fish poisons are often made from plant parts that have been powdered and are sprinkled over water so fish will nibble them and become numbed so they can be collected easily. Some plants are used to poison one's enemies, even to determine the guilt or innocence of a person suspected of a crime. (Strychnine has been used this way in Madagascar. It's hard to know if the accused ever survives such an ordeal.) Many poisonous plants are also used in minute doses as medicines, and some of these seem to have authentic curative properties.

There are any number of poisonous plants within a stone's throw of where you live, but you are not likely to be poisoned by them unless you misidentify them, use the wrong part, use the right part in the wrong season, or prepare them the wrong way. All of this can be avoided by following the instructions given in this book.

To avoid poisoning by edible wild plants, know the plant first, know its look-alikes, know when it's edible, know which part is edible, know how it's edible (whether raw or cooked, and how), and know how much is too much.

Prickly pear

Mayapples

THE RIGHT WAY AND THE WRONG WAYS TO EAT EDIBLE WILD PLANTS

When you see rhubarb in the grocery store sold with its leaves attached, you know to discard the leaves, don't you? The leaves are toxic. The part you want is the red stem.

Similarly, you know how to use horseradish, right? You grate the root; you don't boil it and eat it as you would a root vegetable such as a parsnip.

No one is born with this knowledge. You learn it somehow, from someone or from a book. Without being shown, would you know how to eat artichokes or pomegranates? The following are some ways to look at edibility across several types of plants.

- **Wrong part of the plant:** Pokeweed when it first appears is an edible cooked green, but its root, though it tastes good and gives no hint of its toxicity, causes serious poisoning.

- **Right part but not prepared properly:** Cactus pads (nopales) in grocery stores have been cleaned before sale. Wild-gathered prickly pear pads have to be cleaned of their numerous tiny spines that are set in little cushions around the face of the pads. The spines need to be dug out and removed before the plants can be safely cooked and eaten.

- **Right part but not cooked:** Elderberry makes a very tasty jelly but is not palatable raw.

- **Right part but wrong season:** Mayapples (yellow-orange) are delicious, but unripe mayapples (green) cause digestive cramps.

- **Right part, but too much eaten:** Wild cherries are a great find, but overeating them can cause sudden, unexpected bowel movements.

- **Misidentification:** Hogpeanuts (*Amphicarpaea bracteata*) can be common in places in eastern North America, but collecting the underground tuber can be tricky. If the connection is broken between the plant and the tuber, you are as likely as not, if you keep digging, to find something else entirely—for example, the corm of Jack-in-the-Pulpit. If chewed raw, this corm inflames the mucous membranes in the mouth by embedding calcium oxalate crystals.

Cherries

Foraging Laws

There is a common law tradition in parts of northern Europe that allows people to trespass on other people's property, to walk across areas that were once a commonly used right of way. When doing so, one is also permitted to pick a variety of wild plants and mushrooms that occur there. In other regions of Europe and in parts of the United Kingdom, there is the right to forage the four Fs: flowers, fruit, foliage, and fungi. Largely, however, this depends on whether one is on public or private land.

In the United States, where property rights are often interpreted as sacred writ, trespassing is prohibited and foraging on private land is punishable by law. Foraging on public lands depends on whether you are in a city, county, state, or national park, or national forest. Different laws apply, and even one city's or state's laws can be very different from another's. It would seem to be better to check first (assuming there is anyone in authority to ask). By alerting an authority to what you intend to do, you are just more likely to be told not to do it—not because there is a law that can be pointed out to you, but because people in authority have a vested interest in just saying no.

SEASIDE TREASURE

At Fire Island National Seashore, the Sunken Forest is a treasure trove of edible wild plants. One time I was stopped by a ranger and we discussed what I could and could not pick. I was told I could not pick beach plums that were plentiful along the trails. I was not to go off the boardwalk trails through the forested area. Just as I was about to give up, I saw some glasswort and sea blite growing in the water. According to this ranger, since they were in the tidal zone, they were okay to gather. It was apparent that she was making up the rules as we walked along. In any case, she left and returned to the ranger station, and I was on my own to do what I wanted, given the rules she laid down.

Some parks post notices about fines to be incurred for foraging. In other parks, such as Bear Mountain State Park in New York, the ranger tells you what you're doing is illegal and that you cannot leave the park with your ill-gotten gains, then leaves you to your own devices. Central Park in New York City, for example, encouraged foraging a few decades back (see *The Central Park Book* by Elizabeth Barlow [1977]), but subsequently changed the rules. Although foraging still occurs, it is mostly done by foreign tourists as they walk through the park and encounter familiar berries.

What to do? Rather than openly breaking the law, especially if you're foraging with children, try to make friends with the rangers in charge. It's not always easy, but many times they are more than willing to listen—and learn.

CHAPTER 2

EDIBLE WILD PLANTS: THE WHERE AND THE WHEN

We are surrounded by edible wild plants. They're in our homes without our being aware of it. Our kitchens are stocked with herbs and spices and teas and jellies that are wild harvested. Edible wild plants are in our markets and restaurants, too. Before we conclude that these edibles are too wild to find or to tame, we need to know just what they are and where and when they're most likely going to be found. Frequenting your local farmers' market is a good way to see what's out there. Vendors sell lots of edible wild plants in season. Restaurants, also—especially upscale ones specializing in locavore foods (those found within 100 miles [160 km] of the restaurant) or, say, Japanese restaurants that specialize in seasonal menus—feature edible wild plants in season. Once you see and taste these plants under safe circumstances—that is, either identified by the market or restaurant—you're ready to move out on your own to find your own edible wild plants, to identify them by yourself, and to cook them yourself to see how they compare with what you can buy in the market or order at restaurants.

Section 1 of this chapter escorts you through your home, markets, and restaurant menus to familiarize you with edible wild plants. Section 2 of this chapter takes you out on a half dozen or so walks through nearby areas loaded with edible wild plants. You have to know what's there in order to see it.

◀ Milkweed buds and flowers

SECTION 1

BEFORE YOU EVER PICK AN EDIBLE WILD PLANT

What are the edible wild plants that you can find and eat without ever having to go into the "wild"? Can you find wild foods without actually picking anything from your lawn, backyard, along the road, or in a park or woods? The answer is yes. Much of what we can already find in our homes or markets or restaurants is often derived from the same plants we find growing wild around us.

Let's first hunt for the edible wild plants we already use.

INSIDE THE HOME

Maple Syrup

Maple syrup is the much-reduced boiled sap of the sugar maple tree. Tapping maple trees is an annual late winter event in parts of northeastern North America. It's a celebration of the coming spring, as well as a tasty treat, a sugar substitute, and a business. School children are bused out to maple sugar farms where they can watch and even participate in putting spouts into the trees and gathering the dripping sap in buckets.

Boiling down the sap is usually done in a specially built shelter. There's a 40:1 ratio of sap to syrup, such that maple sap, which tastes like water and is about 2 percent sugar, is reduced to the product we buy in stores.

Some regions offer syrup from other trees, such as the red maple or even birch sap or syrup, which is sold in some Russian groceries wherever communities of Russians live.

Herbal Teas

Herbal teas are common offerings in homes now, in part because many are caffeine-free. We might have in our kitchens chamomile tea or one of the mint teas. In this book, you'll find recipes for pineapple-weed tea (which is closely related to chamomile and often labeled chamomile in farmers' markets), linden-flower tea, rose-hip tea, and wild-mint tea, all easily made wild teas that are caffeine free, safe to use and good for you—and they taste good, too.

Honey

Whether it's a generic wildflower honey or an exotic, such as basswood (a kind of linden) or tupelo honey, it's a wild plant food produced by bees.

Wild Rice

Some people use wild rice in place of white or brown rice for special recipes. Though we do not discuss wild rice in this book, its name gives it away as an edible wild food.

Pine Nuts

You may keep a package of pine nuts (seeds) in the freezer to use in making a pesto sauce for pasta. Pine nuts are actually the commercially marketed seeds of particular pine trees. These seeds develop inside the familiar pinecone. All pines produce such seeds, but only a few have seeds large enough for human consumption. These marketable pine nuts come from pines that grow in the warmer parts of Europe and the Mediterranean, as well as the southwestern United States.

Brazil Nuts

Brazil nuts are gathered wild. Brazil nut trees are forest trees that produce huge fruits containing a great many large seeds, which we call Brazil nuts. This forest tree is found wherever a little animal called the agouti has buried the seeds, much like squirrels in the Northern Hemisphere bury acorns. Brazil nuts are a wild-crafted food and an important cash crop for local peoples in forested parts of eastern South America.

THE "ROOTS" OF PHARMACEUTICALS

That willow trees make an aspirinlike compound is not surprising once you come to see plants as organisms rather than "things." We now know that not only willow trees but also a great many different kinds of trees can produce this aspirinlike compound for much the same reason that people take aspirin: It works as an anti-inflammatory at sites where trees get injured.

Until fairly recently in human history, medicines were primarily plants. In modern medicine, whole plants have been replaced by the extracted biologically active compound that is wanted, so that compounds in the plants that might complicate the patient's condition can be eliminated. In addition, synthetic compounds, such as paclitaxel, have been developed that are similar to ones that occur wild plants so that the plants don't have to be hunted and collected again and again, perhaps even threatening the existence of particular plants in high demand.

Next time you reach for an antihistamine, read the label. You might see that it contains alkaloids in the Nightshade family.family, maybe even belladonna, or deadly nightshade—not enough to kill you by any means, but just enough to cause you to dry up so your nose stops running.

Carrageenan

A number of foods, such as dairy products (cream and ice cream), use carrageenan, from the seaweed Irish moss, as an emulsifier. Although seaweed is usually visible as such in Japanese restaurants, it's surprising to learn that particular substances found in seaweeds are important enough that they have entered the food supply invisibly. Carrageenan, found in red seaweeds, is used in baking, as a thickener, and in maintaining gels in ice cream and cream products. It's also found in toothpastes and shampoos.

Black Walnut

Whatever tasty wild fruit or nut grows locally is what is often found in local markets and restaurants. Sometimes a product will go national or even international if there's a demand for it. Black walnuts, for example, a close relative of the much more widely known English walnut, is a very aromatic nut that occurs throughout eastern North America. It may be seen on a menu in black walnut pancakes. Black walnut brittle is a regionally popular snack food in the U.S. Southeast and Midwest. There's even an ice cream company that sells black walnut ice cream. The shelled nuts are often sold in nut shops throughout Europe, where black walnuts are an appealing addition to holiday fruitcakes.

Spices

A look at one's spice rack might reveal any number of wild plants used as seasonings or as thickeners. Powdered sassafras leaves are marketed as filé, a product that is shaken on gumbos in Creole cooking. Szechuan peppercorns (related to prickly ash, not to pepper) are coveted as a fiery hot, even numbing spice in many Chinese dishes. Examples of spices in this book, besides sassafras leaves and bark, include bayberry leaves (a substitute for bay leaves), spicebush berries (a substitute for allspice), and peppergrass seeds (an easily obtained wild mustard plant).

There are other wild spices, as well, but if the plant's root is required, as in wild ginger, recommending it is tantamount to eradicating it. And if the seeds are used and the plant has poisonous look-alikes, as several plants in the Carrot family do, recommending it puts you at risk—something even some trained botanists are ill equipped to fully appreciate.

Liquors and Spirits

Even the liquor cabinet can reveal the presence of edible wild plants. There are a number of alcoholic (and nonalcoholic) beverages made with herbs. Often called bitters, some are used as aperitifs to whet the appetite, while others are used as digestives to help the eater digest his meal. One such digestif is Fernet-Branca. Made in Milan, it's a bitter alcoholic after-dinner digestive created with more than forty herbs and spices. Bitters are thought to aid digestion, and so alcoholic beverages are made with wild plants that are not considered edible in themselves but are useful in small amounts as part of a beverage, such as yarrow and wormwood leaves and gentian root.

MEDICINES AND OINTMENTS

The medicine cabinet can also reveal a number of edible wild plant products that are used to treat the symptoms of the common cold, suppress coughing, or relieve headaches. Aspirin, for example, originally comes from the bark of willow trees steeped in hot water and salicylic acid is a pain-reducing anti-inflammatory. Willow bark tea can be made at home, especially since willow is nearly worldwide in distribution, and it's also available for purchase online.

LET YOUR FINGERS DO THE STALKING:

Foraging for Edible Wild Plants on the Internet

Even if you are an outdoors type or a rugged, backwoods hiker, you are unlikely to find in your neck of the woods many of the more exotic edible wild plants that you read about in this book. You will find more than enough edible wild plants locally to satisfy anyone with such an interest, but maybe not those plants that occur only in high mountains, along seashores, or in remote corners of the world. Your local farmers' markets won't be stocking such exotic "foreign" fare, and even ethnic markets are unlikely to carry them… But there is a solution!

Medlar, a fruit similar to rose hips

The Internet has opened up the world of wild foods: Let the Web be your oyster. Spend an hour or so online exploring the possibilities and ordering them online. How about cloudberry compote or birch syrup or fresh spruce tips or Labrador tea vinegar? These unique wild foods and many more are available to you now without your ever leaving home. You can collect all the edible wild plants around you, wherever you live, and enhance your harvest with a few additional ones that you can't find locally. There doesn't seem to be anything anymore that can't be found and marketed.

IN THE MARKETPLACE

Before risking life and limb, as it were, foraging for dinner in your backyard or nearby park or woods, what can you find in the marketplace? Wild foods at the grocery store have already been picked and identified for you so, theoretically, you can't make a mistake, at least on the identification. Most local groceries, no matter how bounteous their produce appears, primarily sell the ordinary vegetables and fruits of commerce, such as lettuces, tomatoes, bananas, and oranges. A few seasonal edible wild plants do come

Durian

into some local markets and upscale food stores, so in spring you might find ramps (wild leeks) or fiddleheads ferns, or in summer sea beans (glasswort), or in fall Jerusalem artichokes. Some regional markets will sell locally known wild edibles, such as canned creecy greens (wintercress) and poke sallet (pokeweed shoots) in the southeastern United States.

In Europe, on the other hand, medlar, a fruit similar to rose hips, comes into the fall markets, as do lingonberries, a tart, red cranberrylike fruit, while bins of fresh linden flowers are in summer markets, and stinging nettle is an early-spring favorite.

A few high-end markets may show off fresh tropical fruits, such as passionfruit, rambutans, and dragonfruit. Still, the best places to shop for edible wild plants, no matter where you live, is at farmers' markets.

Health food stores are common in many cities and towns, and they sell an array of grains, seeds, nuts, honeys, dried seaweeds, and plant-based energy drinks, as well as a range of edible wild plants that are believed to be good for your health. Many are sold in pill and capsule form for easier consumption and digestion.

FOR THE LOVE OF DURIAN

Learning to enjoy foul-smelling or very bitter foods, even those loved by millions of people, is not for everyone.

The durian is a large, football-size, sharply spiny fruit that one wouldn't want to touch, let alone have one fall on one's head. In Singapore, the fruit is so beloved that people sleep lightly at night when durians are ripening: It's considered great luck to be the first one to hear a ripe durian fall from a tree, and then to retrieve it.

Durians are sold both fresh and frozen in Asian markets. They are frozen because the odor of the fruit, should it be cut open or just damaged, could cause the store to close until it is aired out. Durian smells like rotting garbage, despite the fact that its fruit tastes divine.

Durians are one of a small number of foods that test people on their breaking point. How foul an odor can you accept in a food?

Durians are sold at train stations in Myanmar. In Borneo, it is not only eaten neat, but made into milkshakes and ice cream, and the Chinese sell a durian cream wafer. The smell of durian will drive some people out of the room, or out of a railway car, much as the smell of ginkgo nuts fallen on city sidewalks repel many urban dwellers.

REGIONAL SPOTLIGHT: JAPAN

In terms of edible wild plants, no national cuisine compares with Japanese. Sushi bars, which are common worldwide, feature edible wild plants like the nori seaweed wrappers around the rice delicacies. A half dozen different seaweeds are in regular use in Japanese restaurants. Familiar Japanese restaurant fare includes wasabi, an extremely hot mustard paste; pickled ginger; and a cosmetic-tasting mint leaf called shiso (*Perilla frutescens*), an herb that is now frequently seen in Western gardens.

The cultivated burdock root is the same as the wild one, except that it is grown for easy harvesting.

Popular greens include a number of mustard plants, such as mizuna and komatsuna, as well as chrysanthemum leaves.

The wilder plant foods used in Japanese foods include Japanese pepper (also known as Szechuan pepper), but the Japanese use the fragrant leafy sprigs in the spring as well as the fruit pods. Japanese pepper is actually not a pepper at all, but a species of *Zanthoxylum*, a genus in the Citrus family.

More surprising is the use of an arum called devil's tongue (*Amorphophallus konjac*). People discovered that its corm, an underground bulblike but solid, fleshy part, could be used to make a gelatin food, a flour, and even a noodle; it appears so disguised in dishes that you won't even know it's there.

Mangosteen (top), rambutan (bottom)

WORLD BOUNTY AND REGIONAL MARKETS

Farmers' markets occur all over the world. You can find local produce spread out on display on market days in Peru just as you can in Papua New Guinea. The food plants are somewhat different from region to region, but there is always a wealth of wild foods to choose from in season. One has the same feeling of abundance and diversity at farmers' markets in New York City, Denver, London, Paris, and Zurich.

Farmers' Markets

At a regional farmers' market, in addition to all the regular produce such as spinach and rhubarb, one can find an amazing diversity of edible wild plants for sale. Your typical large farmers' markets, whether in the United States or Europe, will differ only in the

Bitter melon (*Momordica charontia*) (top), loquat (bottom)

Litchee (top), longon (bottom)

kinds of local wild plants that come to market, rather than the quantity:

Greens: catnip, chickweed, dandelion greens, garlic mustard, ramps (wild leeks), stinging nettles, violets, watercress

Nuts: black walnuts, hickory nuts, butternuts

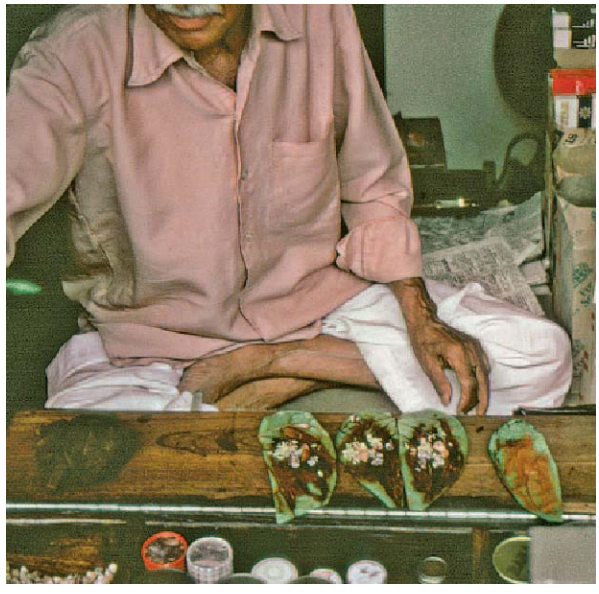
Syrups: sugar maple, red maple syrups

Jellies and jams: blackberry, black-cap raspberry, loganberry, mixtures of different berries

Relishes, sauces, and fruit vinegars: These are often combinations of different herbs and berries. People at the market also sell wild berry tree and shrub seedlings, such as Juneberry and elderberry. Wild herb and mushroom cheeses are available to taste and buy. Wild mushrooms, such as morels, are sold by the quarter pound (about 100 grams). Wild teas and exotic spices are prominently displayed, as are whole heads of sunflower seeds. Even ginseng is sold by the whole root or powdered, for a steep price. It certainly seems that whatever one wants one can find at a farmers' market.

Asian Markets

For more exotic fare, every city around the world with an Asian population has an Asian food store. Some of these stores carry fresh, frozen, canned, dried, and pickled wild plant foods for Chinese, Japanese, Thai, and Vietnamese cuisine. Perhaps the most popular bitter food in the world is bitter melon



Paan seller in New Delhi

(*Momordica charontia*). It is in such demand that it's sold year-round in locales such as New York City's Chinatown. In Asian food stores, you can find an assortment of greens, mostly mustards, dried seaweeds, and just about everything that can be canned, including mangosteens, rambutans, litchees, longans, and loquats. In addition, you can find fresh jack fruit, different varieties of mangos, and the inimitable durian.

Hispanic Markets

In front of some shops, in city neighborhoods with a Hispanic population, one can find 6-foot (2-meter) lengths of sugarcane and boxes of mangoes, coconuts, dates, and fresh figs (in season) for sale.

Indian Markets

If there is a population in your town from India, there could be a "little India" neighborhood where everything familiar to Indians is sold, such as a toothpaste made from the neem tree or the ingredients needed to make paan, a quid that you place in your cheek. Paan is made from a number of plants, including some with stimulant properties and others that are aromatic; sometimes even tobacco is added. Paan is used so commonly in parts of Asia that there are signs posted on buildings stating that paan spitting is forbidden. The bitter juices that build up in the mouth and have to be expelled from time to time are red in color and leave an unsightly stain behind.

IN RESTAURANTS

Many mainstream or standard fare chain restaurants offer fairly predictable "comfort" food, with no challenging or "wild" ingredients. But high-end restaurants can offer unusual seasonal specialties, such as ramps or lamb's quarters, or unexpected combinations of foods.

Latin American restaurants, such as Peruvian or Brazilian places, offer dishes such as heart of palm salad, cherimoya tart, and bowls of roasted Brazil nuts. In North Africa, in countries such as Morocco, the plant foods, like the animal foods, are seasoned with unique herbs and spices. In this region there is a fairly large number of common and unusual herbs and spices, and the art of mastering the right mixture is a hard-won skill.

Sharply sour, strongly minty, peppery, and spicy are just a few ways of describing the aromas and tastes of the foods you can get in a Moroccan restaurant.

Picking juneberries (serviceberries)

SECTION 2

YOUR FIRST FORAGING OUT OF DOORS

THE EDIBLE WILD PLANTS GROWING AT YOUR FEET

The plants described and illustrated in this guide can be found in particular areas at particular times of the year. Because most of these plants are cosmopolitan, or at least grow throughout much of the world's temperate zones, you know they're there. What you need to know, besides what they look like and what looks like them, is just where and when to find them.

By taking a foraging walk in about a half dozen different environments that are most likely near where you live, you can come across most of the plants in this book.

note: All plants in **bold** below are featured in this guide.

SEVEN FORAGING WALKS

The following seven foraging walks are intended to illustrate the kinds of plants one would see in each environment. The more than fifty plants listed below are organized by the kind of habitat where they can most readily be found.

Lawns (#1), for example, contain weeds—that is, small, herbaceous plants that grow in among the grasses.

Open spaces in parks (#2) offer larger weedy things, many with three-foot (one-meter) or higher flowering stalks.

The ornamental trees and shrubs walk (#3) includes those ornamental—introduced—woody plants with edible parts.

The wooded areas walk (#4) lists native woody plants.

Wetland areas (#5) include some of the cosmopolitan plants that can be found in temperate-zone wetlands.

The seashores walk (#6) has some of the most characteristic edible plants found along the world's seashores.

Foraging while traveling (#7) puts in perspective the world's edible wild plants—that is, that many of them are cosmopolitan weeds and can be found anywhere you go, even to the ends of the Earth.

For all the exotic plants on the planet that you will encounter on travels round the world, it's the edible weeds such as dandelion, wood sorrel, and blackberry that shows you how we are all connected despite differences in language, culture, and geographic location.

Dandelions and purslane can be as common as sidewalks in urban areas.

Walk #1 — Lawns, Backyards, and Neighborhood Sidewalks

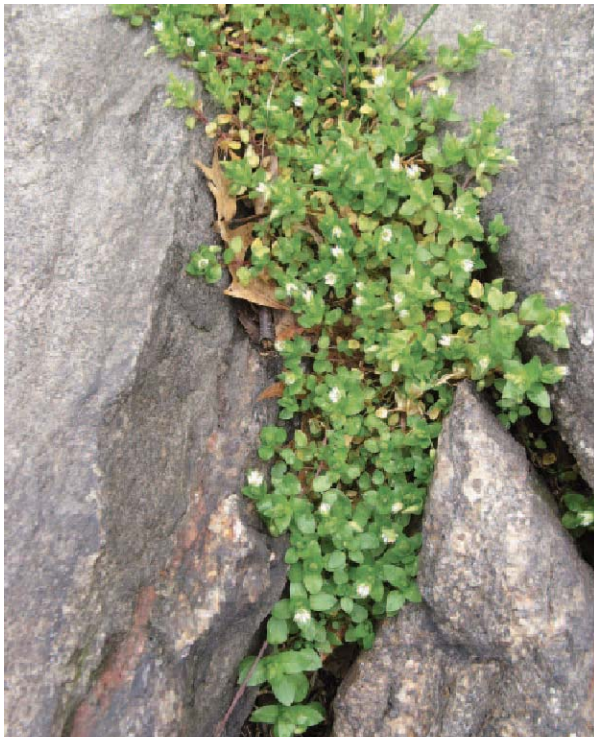
General Description: As soon as you step outside on a spring or summer day, you encounter weeds, and the more you look for them the more you see. Some lawns might look grassy, but close up you see beds of clovers and bunches of little leaves that are nothing like blades of grass. Some of the most common, conspicuous, and cosmopolitan weeds, and some of the best ones to use in salads, soups, and stir-fries, are less than 100 feet (30 meters) from your door regardless of whether you are in New York, Cape Town, London, Buenos Aires, or Kyoto.

Do not be overwhelmed by this bounty. By trying *not* to identify everything you see and just concentrating on a dozen or so of the most common, you can build up a repertoire of edible wild plants that you can gather at will and at the last moment.

caution: As with any area that you collect in, it's important to know if the ground has been treated with herbicides or pesticides before you gather anything to eat.

Early Spring. In early spring, before fresh grass emerges, blades that look like grass, but with hollow stems and smelling of onions when broken, become conspicuous once the snow melts. This is a wild onion, sometimes called **field garlic** or **wild garlic**. It grows up out of a bulb, and the whole plant can be harvested for salads and soups. **Dandelion** also grows in lawns, and the best leaves are the first ones that appear. Different **clovers** are a dominant ground cover in many yards, and an even better edible, and clover look-alike, is a little plant with heart-shaped cloverlike leaves, the tart-tasting **wood sorrel**.

Violets are almost as common as dandelions and easily noticed when their blue flowers bloom.



Chickweed is one of the first weeds to flower in sunny spots in early spring parks.

LEARN MORE ABOUT THESE PLANTS ON THE FOLLOWING PAGES:

Amaranth ____ 134
Catnip ____ 129
Chickweed ____ 144
Clovers ____ 146
Curly Dock ____ 138
Dandelion ____ 122
Lamb's Quarters ____ 135
Mallow ____ 160
Peppergrass ____ 118
Purslane ____ 141
Shepherd's Purse ____ 119
Violets ____ 145
Wild Garlic ____ 109
Wood Sorrel ____ 140

Chickweed is almost always about, especially along the interface between sidewalks and lawns, and its distinctive trailing habit, small leaves, and tiny, bright white petals make it readily noticeable. Also in early spring, the first crinkly, straplike **curly dock** leaves appear, as do the rounded, toothed leaves of cheeses, the common **mallow**.

A number of mustards are early-spring plants, such as **shepherd's purse**, but by summer it's **peppergrass** that's conspicuous in yards and byways. Mints are also early-spring plants, but it's **catnip** that's minty and tasty (even to noncats).

Purslane becomes most noticeable in late spring when it opens its bright, five-petaled yellow flowers about the same time **lamb's quarters** appears, and both become ubiquitous by summer, as does **amaranth**. All these you can find in yards and along neighborhood streets. There are other plants in lawns, backyards, and along neighborhood streets, but like plantain, a flat-to-the-ground weed with very distinctly veined broad leaves (not to be confused with the green, bananalike fruit), these are not weeds worth eating. Although some may be used as medicinals, some weedy things are known to be poisonous.

Other Seasons. When spring moves into summer, most of these weeds flower and disappear. Some remain, however, so you'll always see wood sorrel, purslane, and clovers. Once autumn comes, though, it's like a second spring. Field garlic, fresh dandelion leaves, fresh curly dock, new garlic mustard leaves, and others dot the lawns and sidewalks until freezing weather blunts their growth. Still, even during winter, even under snow, field garlic stays fresh, as does garlic mustard and a few others. There's no season when edible wild plants cannot be found!

Daylily is a common wildflower in sunny areas in parks

Walk #2 — Parks: Open Spaces

General Description. Most urban and suburban parks are composed of open areas, usually with park benches around the periphery of a park and a central somewhat wooded area. The border areas of parks are sun-drenched places that are home to any number of growing plants that thrive in sunny, disturbed soils. Also, where there is moist soil, near wet areas, there are other edibles that thrive in shady places in our urban/suburban parks.

Early Spring. One of the most noticeable plants in the early spring is the rosette, or circle, of rounded, toothed leaves of **garlic mustard**. Looking somewhat like violet leaves, these leaves can be identified by their garlicky, mustardy flavor. At about the same time, the first conspicuous shoots of **daylily** emerge and give park grounds a fresh, green appearance. Hiding near stony embankments, you can find the still-red leaves of **sheep sorrel**; these leaves are spear shaped with little earlike lobes at their bases, and their flavor is sharply lemony, something good for salads, soups, or drinks.

Many people consider the best edible spring green to be **stinging nettle**. It's not something you want to touch accidentally, but wearing gloves you can harvest it readily. Stinging nettle is one of the

Milkweed is a common sunny park weed that's an essential part of the monarch butterfly's migration path.

LEARN MORE ABOUT THESE PLANTS ON THE FOLLOWING PAGES:

Daylily 113
Garlic Mustard .. 115
Japanese Knotweed 137
Milkweed 142
Pokeweed 143
Ramps 110
Sheep Sorrel ... 139
Stinging Nettle . 133
Sumacs 91

most common weeds that comes up in shady, damp areas, often near water, and is easily overlooked.

Some plants become too famous for their own good, and while stinging nettle is in no danger of overpicking, wild **ramps** (or wild leeks) are in danger in some areas, though elsewhere they come up thick as lawn grass and grow as far as the horizon.

Japanese knotweed pokes up suddenly in late April, and by mid-May is over 5 feet (1.5 meters) high. When Japanese knotweed is just a foot (30.5 centimeters) high or so and the shoots look like fat asparagus spears, it is the time to harvest it. By mid-May **pokeweed** shoots are noticeable and collectible before they're a foot (30.5 centimeters) or so high. **Milkweed** shoots appear at this time, too, but you want the buds and pods, not the shoots, which can be troublesome for most people to identify with certainty.

Summer. In the summertime in open park areas, you can find stands of the soft, fuzzy, red fruiting cones of the edible **sumacs**, which are collected to make ideal lemony summer drinks.

Juneberry (serviceberry) is now more common as ornamentals in cities than wild in nearby woods.

Walk #3 — Parks: Ornamental Trees and Shrubs

General Description. Urban and suburban parks around the world are more similar than you might think. Many of the same ornamental trees and shrubs can be found in these parks because these are the plants that either have showy flowers or fruits that attract birds, or they are planted because they are pollution resistant. Many also bear choice edibles.

Early Spring. **Cornelian cherry** is a dogwood that is one of the first park trees to flower in the spring, and its fruit in late summer is like a red cherry and just as good. **Mulberries** are common park trees that produce prodigious amounts of fruit that looks much like blackberries and ranges in taste from sugary sweet to tart. **Juneberries**, or serviceberries, are a common woody plant in parks that are most easily recognized when they flower in early spring, and the abundant fruit, ripe in June or July depending on latitude, looks like a cross between a blueberry and a tiny, soft crabapple. **Highbush blueberry** bushes are most easily seen when they flower in masses of small, white, bell-shaped blooms in early spring—then look for their ripening fruit in parks in early summer.

Summer. **Linden** trees are favorites in northern countries for their intensely fragrant flowers in early summer, which make a memorable tea. Summer

Gathering a container of wineberries in a city park

is the season for all the bramble fruits in the genus *Rubus*, and they follow one another to ripening, starting with **black raspberries, wineberries**, **blackberries/dewberries**, and raspberries. These compete for attention with ripening of the cherry trees, the mazzard (sweet) cherry, followed in August by the black and choke cherry. Then come the heavy-purple-berry-fruiting **elderberry** bushes.

Autumn. Autumn brings the ripening of the **crabapples** and **hawthorn** fruits. Finally, by midfall, the **ginkgo** nuts are falling on park paths, where many Chinese people can be found out under their favorite ginkgo tree gathering the last of the year's park tree fruits.

LEARN MORE ABOUT THESE PLANTS ON THE FOLLOWING PAGES:

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Black Raspberries ____ 72
Blueberries ____ 84
Cornelian Cherries ____ 93
Crabapples ____ 80
Elderberries ____ 90
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Linden ____ 152
Mulberries ____ 82
Wineberries ____ 71

Mayapple is sometimes found in open woods as far as the eye can see.

Its fall leaf color gives sassafras away in a still green woods.

Walk #4 — Wooded Areas

General Description. Within a short distance of most homes in the northern temperate zone are woods and forests filled with vast numbers of trees. Many of these have edible parts that go unused by people now, but they were once the lifeline for hunter-gatherer groups for thousands of years, providing a reliable staple diet before agriculture did. The endless conifer zone across northern North America and Eurasia offers trees that are a source of antiscorbutic needle-leaf teas. Some of the pines have large enough seeds to compete with commercial pine nuts. You can also find abundant yields of **acorns**, **hickory nuts**, and **black walnuts**. The walnut and **chestnut** trees of Europe and Asia produce bumper crops of familiar walnuts and chestnuts. **Hazelnut** trees and bushes produce filberts, like those we can buy in the market.

Depending on location, woodland fruit trees can include **persimmon** trees or **pawpaw** (also known as custard apple) trees or **wild apples**, or **fox grapes** hanging in bunches on vines entangling these trees. The **sassafras** tree is a wide-ranging woodland weed tree in eastern North America that offers a refreshing, root beer–like beverage from its boiled roots. Ground fruit plants in woodland areas include **mayapples** that produce summer bushels of a tropical-tasting fruit that makes a delicious pie filling.

LEARN MORE ABOUT THESE PLANTS ON THE FOLLOWING PAGES:

Acorns ____ 58
Black Walnuts ____ 60
Chestnuts ____ 63
Fox Grapes ____ 88
Hazelnuts ____ 62
Hickory Nuts ____ 61
Mayapples ____ 96
Pawpaws ____ 95
Persimmons ____ 97
Sassafras ____ 154
Wild Apples ____ 80

Fiddlehead fern is a common wetland fern in the early spring.

Cattail is an unmistakable cosmopolitan wetland edible.

Walk #5 — Wetland Areas

General Description. Wetland areas are fresh- or brackish-water places, such as ponds, lakes, streams, brooks, creeks, and swamps. One or another of these can be found just about everywhere that's not an arid desert. Walking about in a late-winter swamp, it's hard not to see the dark red, wigwamlike flowering structures of **skunk cabbage** sticking out above the ice. Soon, the foot-high (30.5-centimeter-high) cones of furled leaves will be visible.

Spring. By spring, open pond margins will show the first growths of **arrowhead** shoots and the spicy spears of **sweet flag**. The wet ground nearby will have bouquet growths of **ostrich fern fiddlehead** unfurling. Where last year's **cattail stalks** are massed, the young shoots start to rise.

By midspring, still-water areas are often covered by duckweed, a kind of pond scum that is a mélange of the world's smallest flowering plant plus a number of algae. In Thailand, duckweed is grown in contamination-free pools and harvested, dried, powdered, and sold as a protein additive to foods. In moving waters, one can find **watercress**, the same plant that you buy in markets.

Wetland areas are also home to wild rice, which is widely distributed in North America. In nearby woods, **spicebush**, or American allspice, as well as **blueberries** and **cranberries**, can thrive.

LEARN MORE ABOUT THESE PLANTS ON THE FOLLOWING PAGES:

Arrowhead ____ 162
Blueberries _____ 84
Cattails _____ 106
Cranberries _____ 86
Fiddlehead Fern _____ 105
Skunk Cabbage _____ 111
Spicebush _____ 103
Sweet Flag _____ 112
Watercress _____ 114

Picking glasswort (or sea-beans) by the seashore.

Beach plums are as tasty as they are beautiful along the seashore.

Walk #6 — Seashores

General Description. Taking a walk along a beach to beach-comb and look for edible wild plants can be like a treasure hunt. Many things, including edibles, are washed up by the tides. Seaweeds are scattered about on the beach. You can sort them by color and shape. A common green one that looks like lettuce is called just that: sea lettuce. A red seaweed that resembles a delicate piece of lace in the water so it can spread itself out is one of the common seaweeds used as a growth medium or a thickener. A brown one festooned with little clusters of sacs is called bladder wrack. All are edible and used as foods or seasonings.

At places along the tide line, where seawater washes up on the beach every day, there are a couple of plants that feel right at home. One is **glasswort** (called sea beans in markets). It is a jointed, green plant that looks to some people like succulent green beans. Glasswort is crisp and salty until it gets too tough in the late fall. An adjacent tidal zone plant, looking bushy but quite soft to the touch, is called sea blite, and it's also very salty.

A bit further up on the beach where there's a line of shrubby plants, you can find plants that are salt tolerant. Three are easy to recognize on the Atlantic seaboard. One is the **seaside rose**, which has white and pink flowers from May to September and large reddish fruits called rose hips. A second is a shrub with many small, five-petaled white flowers in May, which are then replaced by green, to pink or yellow, to blue and purple fruits later in the summer. These are the **beach plums** that grow wild along the Atlantic Coast, but not inland. The third conspicuous plant is **bayberry**, recognizable by its clusters of small, silvery-gray dry berries and leaves that, when crushed, emit a fragrant, baylike odor.

LEARN MORE ABOUT THESE PLANTS ON THE FOLLOWING PAGES:

Bayberry 151
Beach plums 77
Glasswort 136
Seaside rose 65

EDIBLE WILD PLANT FESTIVALS

Festivals that celebrate edible wild plants date back to prehistoric times. Different peoples around the world celebrate the coming of spring or the harvest with various plants. Religious rituals such as waving date-palm fronds, eating bitter greens, or marching around carrying giant phallic-shaped yams are ways of celebrating annual events with plants that have assumed huge symbolic value. In ancient Europe, in the low countries, people were given a meal of wild plants, including our familiar lamb's quarters and amaranth, before being sacrificed and buried as an offering to the earth spirits for a good year's harvest.

On a more cheerful note, here are just some of the wild food festivals that occur around the globe:

- *Sagre* are held all over Italy every year. *Sagre* are fairs to celebrate local foods as they become available.

- In Japan, there is an annual fern festival, where ferns are collected and consumed, and an annual seaweed festival, where a large number of different seaweeds are prepared in different ways for people to sample.

- Stinging nettle festivals are held in towns in France and Belgium, as well as British Columbia.

- Ramps or wild leek festivals are held every spring in more than a dozen places in the southeastern United States.

- An annual persimmon festival is held every fall in the U.S. Midwest.

- A wild blueberry festival is held during harvest season in Nova Scotia.

- There's an annual wild foods festival every March in Hokitika, New Zealand.

- The Nature Wonder Wild Food Weekend occurs every September in West Virginia.

- Similar wild food festivals occur in the summer in the United Kingdom in Pembrokeshire and another just south of Dublin, Ireland.

There's always a festival happening somewhere around the planet.

Much like festivals that celebrate cultivated foods, such as strawberry and cherry festivals, wild foods festivals sometimes have cooking contests and, in addition to activities focused on the foods themselves, many have games to occupy the children, arts and crafts events, costume parties, marching bands, and even the selection of a queen for the day.

Blackberries

Cattails (top) and dandelions (bottom)

Walk #7 — Foraging Abroad: Is Foraging While Traveling a Good Idea?

While it might be true that there are about a hundred edible wild plants in any area where you find communities of people, and more than five hundred edible wild plants that are incorporated into local diets in some parts of India, you must still identify the plant and know what part or parts are used, when, how, and how much before you eat something you've never seen or eaten before.

New Zealand, for example, might seem to be so far removed from Europe, North America, or East Asia that no plants there could be the same. But it is a temperate zone country, just in the Southern Hemisphere rather than the Northern. A foraging trip through New Zealand can reveal to you well over a hundred different edible wild plants, including seaweeds, mushrooms, ferns, conifers, and flowering plants. While the trees and shrubs are, indeed, very different from north temperate ones, the weeds, mushrooms, and seaweeds are nearly the same—that is, they are recognizable because they are cosmopolitan. For example:

- **Cattail** grows in marshy areas.

- **Glasswort** grows along the coast, as do seaweeds.

- **Dandelion**, **sow thistle**, **stinging nettle, wood sorrel**, a number of mustards (cresses), and five different **blackberries** can be found in New Zealand and used as described in this guide.

Glasswort (top) and stinging nettle (bottom)

Sow thistle (top) and wood sorrel (bottom)

In other words, edible wild plants are primarily cosmopolitan weedy plants. There are intriguing exceptions, and there are trees and shrubs that are local and not found outside a limited range, but, by and large, the good edibles that you discover growing wherever you live can also be found from Brigadoon to Shangri-la.

You might also discover something new, such as New Zealand spinach, a species of *Tetragonia*, which is not a spinach and which can now be found as a specialty green in some upscale Northern Hemisphere groceries, as well as a naturalized introduced weed on the U.S. West Coast.

LEARN MORE ABOUT THESE PLANTS ON THE FOLLOWING PAGES:

Blackberries ____ 69
Cattail _____ 106
Dandelion ____ 132
Glasswort ____ 136
Sow Thistle ____ 127
Stinging Nettle _ 133
Wood Sorrel ___ 140

CHAPTER 3

PLANTS FRONT AND CENTER: WILD PLANT IDENTIFICATION

We all know what plants are, or at least we think we do. Ask someone what a plant is, and the answers range from "not animals" to "green things" to "things that make their own food." If you ask what kinds of plants there are, the answers might be something like "trees" and "bushes" and "flowers." Those are the kinds of answers you get from some city people when you ask them what plants are in city parks. You won't hear the plant names—you won't hear much more than what a five-year-old might know, as if knowing what the plants are is not their business.

Go into any grocery, and you'll find the arrangement of the fruits and vegetables quite reasonable in terms of how we use them. Lettuce and tomatoes are together, along with watercress, scallions, and carrots, and these are labeled "vegetables"; meanwhile, apples, oranges, grapes, bananas, and strawberries are in a separate area called "fruits." Potatoes might be in bins by themselves or beside bins of onions. If you've never lived on a farm and you don't garden, these products are just a bunch of shapes and colors; they are not plants to most people, just foods. After all, who has ever seen the leafy green potato plant, or its flower or fruit? Not city folks, and not gardeners, either. When you buy a big bunch of leafy greens, if they're not lettuce or spinach, what are the chances that the checkout clerk will know what they are? They could be turnip tops or Swiss chard or escarole.

◀ Purslane

To answer the question about what plants are is, in part, to answer the question about what plants do. This is crucial if you want to eat them and not be poisoned as a result.

HOW PLANTS SURVIVE

The simple answer is that plants exist to grow and make more of themselves, much as animals do. One difference is that plants can't run away and hide when they are attacked by predators—which are animals. To defend themselves, plants have developed an arsenal of weapons to discourage or prevent animals from eating them.

Armed and Potentially Dangerous

The most obvious of these weapons are the thorns, spines, and prickles many plants are armed with. Some plants in tropical countries are known as ant plants because ants live in their hollow stems and feed off an insect-made honeydew and, in turn, keep everyone else away. Some plants have caustic juices that cause blistering on contact. Mostly, however, plants produce poisons, compounds called secondary metabolites that cause serious internal poisoning upon ingestion.

In some cases, the poisons exist throughout the plant but are concentrated in the roots, like in pokeweed. Sometimes the toxin can be in the leaf but not the stem, as in rhubarb, or in all parts except the fruit, as in the tomato. Even when the fruit pulp is edible, the seed can be toxic if chewed rather than excreted or just spit out, such as in cherries. A plant's fruit is usually the least toxic part of the plant because this is the part the plant "wants" to be eaten by an animal so the seeds can be dispersed (i.e., excreted) somewhere else and a new plant can grow. How toxic a plant is, in part, depends on which animal eats it; so when a plant is referred to as poisonous, it usually means poisonous when ingested by people or their pets.

> Plants, as most people recognize them, are green things of a certain dimension that don't move or run away when approached or touched.

PLANT TAXONOMY AND CLASSIFICATION

How many biologists can identify plants? How many botanists can identify plants? How many can identify plants that aren't local, or even the ones they see every day? The ability to identify plants depends on who's doing it, where, and for what reasons. Someone very knowledgeable about butterflies might know nothing about plants or care very little about which plant is which. Vladimir Nabokov, the novelist and renowned butterfly collector, wrote to his wife one October from South Carolina that he saw "blossoming bushes (one bush here is full of bright berries, as if colored in a cheap Easter purple)." He could have inquired as to what it was (American beautyberry), but his interest in natural science was primarily focused on butterflies.

Even professional botanists are often bewildered by local plants because they are not the kinds of plants these botanists study for a living. A botanist who is expert on local plants is often bewildered by ornamentals or alien invasive plants. Identifying plants is a study more taxing than most people think, which is why identifying edible wild plants requires an attention to details that casual observers will miss.

Plants can be classified in a number of ways, one of which we're using here (the traditional, botanical way), and they can be divided into a number of distinct groups. For example, there are the seed plants and the spore-bearing plants. All plants in this book, except ferns and seaweeds, are plants that produce seeds.

Chemical Compounds

One other component essential to identification and to your safety and good health if you are eating plants, wild or otherwise, is to know what chemical compounds plants produce in their tissues (e.g., in their roots, shoots, leaves, flowers, fruits, or seeds). This element of identification is something unique to plants; identifying animals, and certainly mammals, is distinctly different because not that many animals produce toxins, while a great many plants do. Toxins are plants' primary defense against predators who want to eat them. While all organisms have a basic kind of metabolism, plants produce something called secondary metabolites. These are the classes of toxins that repel, discourage, or kill predators. Each plant family has a recognizable signature composed of its morphology (appearance) and its biochemistry (secondary metabolites).

The Potato or Nightshade family (Solanaceae) is a case in point. We all know potatoes, tomatoes, eggplants, bell peppers, and chili peppers, but we probably couldn't recognize the plants if we saw them growing, at least not without their distinctive edible parts. This family can be identified as a particular family by its flowers and fruit. Even more so, it is understood to be a family of plants closely related by biochemistry. All plants in this family—and there are many, including tobacco and deadly nightshade—produce particular compounds that cause a recognizable kind of poisoning, so much so that hospital emergency rooms often have a sign that lists the symptoms of this family's poisoning syndrome: "Hot as a hare, blind as a bat, dry as a bone, red as a beet, and mad as a hatter." This is a shorthand way of recognizing atropine poisoning; the victim is sweating and flushed, has dry mouth, has trouble seeing, and is raving. While potatoes, tomatoes, eggplants, and peppers are safe to eat (unless spoiled or potatoes are showing sprouts or "eyes"), the green parts of these plants are poisonous, and some plants in this family are deadly. The safest parts of these plants are the fruits, the plant parts containing the seeds.

Woody nightshade (*Solanum dulcamara*) is a poisonous plant that resembles a cherry—but only on the outside.

Potatoes are an underground, tuberlike part that is safe to eat when cooked; this is a good example of a very poisonous plant family with members that have particular parts that are edible and good to eat. Some of the nightshade plants, however, even have dangerously poisonous fruits.

DIFFERENT TAXONOMIES AND THE NAMING OF PLANTS

Plants have been recognized for millennia as having edible and medicinal properties. Once it was discovered that food could be cooked and, hence, made more digestible, many more plants could be eaten and used safely. Knowing which plants could be used required developing a taxonomy, or a system for recognizing the differences between the good ones and the dangerous ones. Names were used to refer to these plants, and the names used often indicated only whether the plant was edible or what it was good for. In different cultures around the world, it was discovered that certain local plants had parts that resembled either the human body or a bodily organ, or, when cut, certain plants exuded a red liquid resembling blood or a yellow one resembling bile. People made

associations, and a belief developed—still current in some circles today—that such resemblances were not coincidental but intended to be discovered by people so they could use these plants to cure diseases. In medieval Europe, this became known as the Doctrine of Signatures, a belief system based on the idea that a supernatural or Earth spirit seeks to help us know good plants from bad or useless ones. Ginseng root is sometimes imagined to have the shape of a human torso, as is mandrake root. These roots have been in use since biblical times, the former promising a life-enhancing power and the latter offering beneficent or malevolent uses depending on the user's purpose.

Traditional societies—that is, non-Western or nonmodern cultures—have a utilitarian plant taxonomy. In Amazonia, for example, there is a simple choice when presented with a plant: Either it's good for something, or it's "flora"—that is, of no interest to the local culture. Some beautiful Amazonian wildflowers are just called "flora," indicating that they are unworthy of attention. Others are recognized often by features strongly reminiscent of the Doctrine of Signatures. Even in Amazonia, where there is no belief system that posits a Garden of Eden, a belief exists that plants are here for our benefit if we know how to recognize them.

Not until the mid-eighteenth century when Carl Linnaeus developed the binomial system of nomenclature did we have a way to refer to plants irrespective of their uses for people. While still not universally employed, it states that every plant, like every animal, has two names. One is the genus name; the other is the species epithet. The genus is based on the principle of similarity: Plants that are similar in a number of ways are placed in the same genus. Hence, for example, the seaside rose and the multiflora rose are both roses in the genus *Rosa*.

The species epithet is based on the principle of difference: Plants in the same genus that are different in a number of ways are placed in different species; hence, *Rosa rugosa* (the seaside rose) has rugose, or wrinkled, leaves, while *Rosa multiflora* (the multiflora rose) is recognized by its mass of small flowers.

> A ten-year-old Amazonian boy who was in training to be a tribe healer told me that a plant we found with a red leaf tip was good for blood disorders and was also used in childbirth. Whatever the validity of this observation, can you imagine the average child talking like this?

COMMON NAMES AND SCIENTIFIC NAMES

Because *rose* is a well-known name, it is used in the naming of many unrelated plants. *Rosa*, the scientific name of the true rose genus, refers only to species of true roses. For example, the rose of Sharon is a *Hibiscus*, and the guelder rose is a *Viburnum*, both totally unrelated to roses. Likewise, just about any green that is edible is likely to be referred to as *spinach*. The true spinach, *Spinacia oleracea*, is not the same as farmers' market wild spinach, *Chenopodium album* (sometimes called lamb's quarters), and not even remotely related to water spinach, which is a morning glory or New Zealand spinach.

Markets use common names, so we see Jerusalem artichoke (*Helianthus tuberosus*), a kind of sunflower that is not an artichoke and not from Jerusalem. Even wild rice (*Zizania aquatica*) is not rice (*Oryza sativa*), and what wild rice is now sold is often not even wild anymore.

Botanists use scientific names—binomials, or two names, a genus and a species epithet—that are constructed using Latin or Greek roots. There are published rules of nomenclature for the use of these scientific names, and it is often the only "language" that one can understand at an international botanical conference.

A classification of plants based on how they affect us will emphasize utility over evolutionary relationships. A contemporary emphasis on evolutionary relationships can yield information on plant utility based on knowing that a plant family's biochemistry is typically shared by most plants in that family. This allows for prediction and can yield helpful pharmaceutical uses based on science rather than folklore.

HOW TO IDENTIFY THE EDIBLE WILD PLANTS IN THIS BOOK

Use *all* your senses. What a plant looks like is not just about the features of a given leaf, but about the whole plant. Very different plants can have surprisingly similar leaves. The flowers are very useful, as are the fruits, if either are available when a plant is examined, but it's the look of the entire plant that is most helpful. Is it a tree, a shrub, a vine, or some kind of herbaceous (nonwoody) plant? How are the leaves arranged on the stem? Are they opposite each other, or alternating along the stem? Are the leaves really leaves or just leaflets? Some plants appear to be very leafy, but in fact are composed of leaves full of leaflets—how do you know which kind you're looking at? One way is to look for the bud (next year's leaf or flower bud), which on woody plants are usually visible by early summer.

There are a great many things to look for, and that is the subject of field botany, or the identification of the plants you find. We're not doing that here because we're only interested in the best of the edible wild plants, not every plant that grows around you. We'll stress the features important for each in the descriptions of particular plants—for example, whether the plant stem is round or square (e.g., mints), whether the leaves are smooth (e.g., docks) or hairy (e.g., burdock), whether the plant is fragrant when crushed (e.g., pineapple weed). Besides seeing, touching, and smelling the plant, you can also consider its taste. Some plants are profoundly bitter (e.g., burdock), pungent (e.g., peppergrass), lemony sour (e.g., wood sorrel), or salty (e.g., glasswort). Even if most are just "herby," you can learn to categorize plants by their taste.

Remember: Tasting is *not* eating. You are just chewing a leaf of a plant you think you know as one way of verifying its identity. You don't need to swallow it to determine its taste. And you are not just tasting any plants you notice; this is an informed tasting to confirm what you think a plant is. (Keep in mind that poison ivy does not need to be tasted or even touched to be identified, nor does stinging nettle need to be touched to be sure it stings.)

Reading the landscape is a way of knowing where to look for what you're seeking. Most weeds are heliophiles—that is, they are sun lovers. They grow in open, sunny, disturbed (i.e., urban and suburban) areas, as well as farmlands. You don't find weeds in woods, at least not in forested areas where a dense leaf canopy keeps the sun from reaching the ground. In open woods, like those in city parks, and even those with large stands of trees, if poison ivy is there, and it is usually conspicuously there (see the description and photos later in the book), it's a good clue that the ground is not effectively shaded from the sun. Most of the greens in this book can be found in open, sunny areas, such as backyards, lawns, sidewalks, vacant lots, urban and suburban parks, and open farmland. Most of the fruits found in this book are also plants of open, sunny areas.

One of the surprises of hunting for edible wild plants is just how many there are around your house and how few there are in the forested parts of the planet. It's not that acorns and hickory nuts cannot be gathered by the ton in forests—they can be. It's that there are not that many different kinds of edible wild plants compared to what we can find in urban and suburban areas.

Phenology is the study of sequence, or what occurs when, and it often uncovers temporal connections between plants and animals or other organisms. For example, shadbush is a name used for Juneberries or

serviceberries. The name *shadbush* refers to the flowering of the plant coming at about the same time as a delectable fish called the shad makes its annual run down the Delaware River. Phenology is knowing that wild strawberries ripen before black raspberries, which ripen before wineberries, so that there's a predictable sequence every year in terms of what's happening in any given area. People who hunt for morels, the first of the year's edible wild mushrooms, wait until some plant clue becomes visible: Some say it's oak leaves just emerging, others that it's flowering dogwood coming into bloom or dandelion in conspicuous flower. They know that it's not worth looking for something until you notice some other event in nature that is believed to happen at the same time.

WHAT KIND OF GREEN IS THAT? OR, HOW TO DISCERN GREENS BEFORE YOU TURN GREEN

Eat what you know. Because any backyard, lawn, or sidewalk border will have dozens of different weeds growing at any one time, and because most of them are not edible or not in a stage of growth to be easily identified or used, it's not a good idea to just pick whatever you find and try to identify—or eat—it. Instead, look for things you read about and would like to find. See what plants in this book interest you enough to want to try them yourself.

Start with farmers' crops. Go to your local farmers' market and look for these plants being sold. There are at least twenty wild edible greens sold during the season. If you don't see what you want, ask for it. Often merchants at farmers' markets know what you are talking about, and they can bring an item to market the following week. These are not expensive greens. The edible wild plant greens sold at farmers' markets include amaranth, chickweed, dandelion, garlic mustard, glasswort, lamb's quarters, mints, purslane, ramps, stinging nettle, watercress, and wintercress.

A popular green among Hispanic cultures is something called pepicha. Its leaves taste like a cross between coriander and sorrel. It's hard to find in field guides, but it can be found on the Internet. It turns out to be a species of *Porophyllum*, a genus of plants in the Aster family, so it's related to dandelions and sunflowers. The clue to identifying this plant, as found on the Internet, is to hold it up to the light to see a large number of what look like white spots in the leaves. These are fragrant oil drops that give the plant its unique taste. By learning this characteristic, not only can you recognize this plant in the market, but you also learn how to examine plants for clues to their identity.

Watch for flowers and fruits for confirmation. If you think you have identified a plant successfully, especially if it's just the greens you're seeing, wait until it flowers and fruits. Even such "obvious" plants like dandelion have look-alikes that can surprise you. If your dandelion leaves throw up a leafy flower stalk, it can't be dandelion, which has a leafless flower stalk.

A pressing of a variety of catnip

Keep a datebook to record what you're seeing and when you're seeing it. This is a very useful reference, and more valuable than field guides that, for example, give flowering dates for a particular plant between April and June. Your datebook can be especially useful the year after you start your recordings so you have something to consult that applies to where you live.

Document your findings descriptively. A pressed plant (i.e., herbarium specimen), a journal entry, carefully worded plant descriptions, photos, and descriptions are all helpful ways to identify plants and avoid mistakes.

Unexpected Surprises in the Marketplace

Not everything sold in markets can be found growing wild outdoors, of course. If you are adventurous, however, you can even find delightful greens in a supermarket that you would never otherwise

You can eat what you buy at farmers' markets at home to see if you like it. If you do and want to forage for your own, make a dried plant pressing of what you bought so you'll have an example of what the plant looks like, something to compare with what you find in the wild. Remember: What you buy in farmers' markets are not the whole plant—root, stem, leaves, flowers, and fruit—but just the cut edible part that is being sold at the moment. Dandelion leaves are sold, sometimes with the root, but rarely with the flower stem attached.

Pressing plants is a way of preserving what the plant looks like so that you can match it against what you think is the same plant you find elsewhere. Collect the plant on a dry day and place it, carefully, in a plastic bag until you get home. Spread the plant leaves out on a piece of paper towel, so that it appears as flat as possible. Place another piece of paper towel on top and then pile several heavy books on top of that. Leave this for three to five days. Then, carefully lift the pressed plant and place on a sheet of mounting paper (this can be a simple sheet of computer printer paper). Use either a bit of glue or transparent tape to affix the plant to the paper. Place a note in the corner of the sheet listing when and where you found this plant. The pressed plant in this photograph is catnip. It's very common in the spring, but this specimen was collected in the fall. The pressing shows that the leaves are arrowhead-shaped, opposite each other on the stalk, toothed along the margin, and attached to the plant stem by a short stalk. Plants are only in flower for a short time, and because this one was, I pressed it, to show the purplish flowers, although this plant is identifiable as a mint without the flowers. It has a strong minty smell when handled. The pressing can then be placed in a box with other pressings, and kept for reference.

encounter. There is often a section in many markets with signs labeling unique or cross-cultural foods. While these are not always accurately labeled by name and grocers are often uninformed about their uses, a little sleuthing on the Internet can confirm a wonderful salad green or root vegetable find.

IDENTIFYING FRUITS AND BERRIES, OR, SHOP BEFORE YOU DROP!

Look for shape. Some fruits are unmistakable. Bananas, for example, even if they're small and red rather than large and yellow, cannot be misidentified in markets where they're sold. Similarly, pineapple is readily recognized, as are apples. When it comes to berries, however, not every red berry is a cherry, nor every blue berry a blueberry. There are easier and more difficult fruits to recognize in markets and in the wild.

Look for texture. Rather than being round and smooth, some berries are bumpy. Strawberries, for example, have a bumpy structure, with the seeds clearly visible just inside the outer skin. Can strawberries be confused with anything else? Not in markets, to be sure. But in the wild? Well, there's a false strawberry called *Duchesnea indica* that has similar leaves and bright red fruit. From a distance, it looks like wild strawberry, but the fruit's structure is a little different—its surface differs in texture and its flower is yellow instead of white. It doesn't matter, in a way, since its fruit is edible, but it is tasteless. Still, you don't want to go about mistaking one thing for another, as sooner or later, the mistake can come back to bite you.

The genus *Rubus* can be found in just about all north and south temperate countries. *Rubus* includes blackberries and raspberries, and these are readily identified as primarily prickly brambles or cane plants with black or red fruit that look somewhat like tiny cherries glued together. It's easy to tell

Cross section of an apple, a type of pome fruit

Rubus species apart just from the fruit because when you pick raspberry types, you leave the core of the fruit on the plant—the raspberries, then, resembling little thimbles in terms of texture rather than bumpy, rounded fruit. Can you mistake blackberries or raspberries for anything else? Well, mulberries look like blackberries and raspberries but grow on trees. People often tell me they've seen blackberry or raspberry trees and wonder whether the berries are edible, which mulberry fruit decidedly is. Nothing poisonous seems remotely like these fruits.

Study the market. If you buy fruit in grocery stores or farmers' markets, you should find strawberries, blueberries, cherries, grapes, and sometimes blackberries and raspberries. In season, you might also find currants and gooseberries for sale, as well as apples and crabapples. Sometimes exotic fruit, such as ground cherry (*Physalis*) or persimmon is sold. These are all fruits that also grow wild in many of the same areas as the markets. Buy and study these fruits in the market first, before you start searching for the wild equivalents.

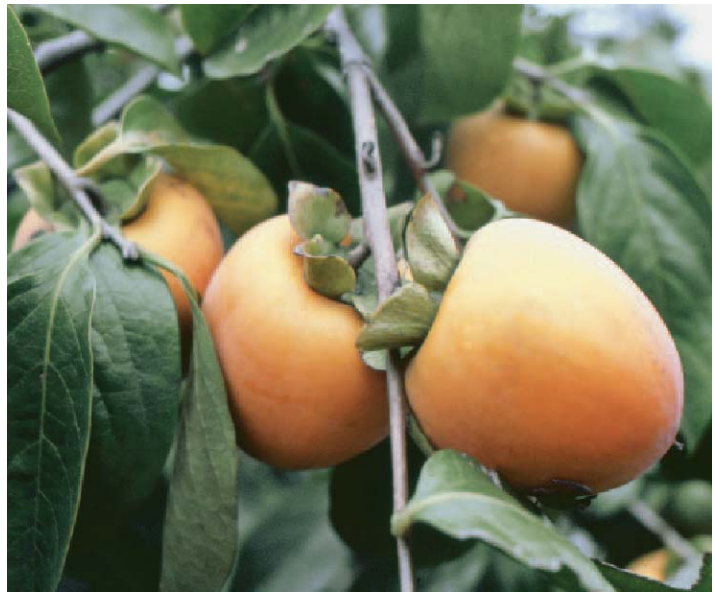
Cross section of a cherry, a type of drupe fruit

Cross section of a mayapple, a type of berry fruit

Look to the seeds. What do the fruits look like inside? How many seeds do they have and where are they? If the fruit is seedless, it only means that it's a horticultural product developed for the market. Buy grapes with seeds, for example, so you can dissect them and learn how many seeds grapes have and what they look like. Cherries and plums have a single seed; apples have several seeds, all contained within a central bonelike core; and mayapples have many small seeds scattered throughout the berry.

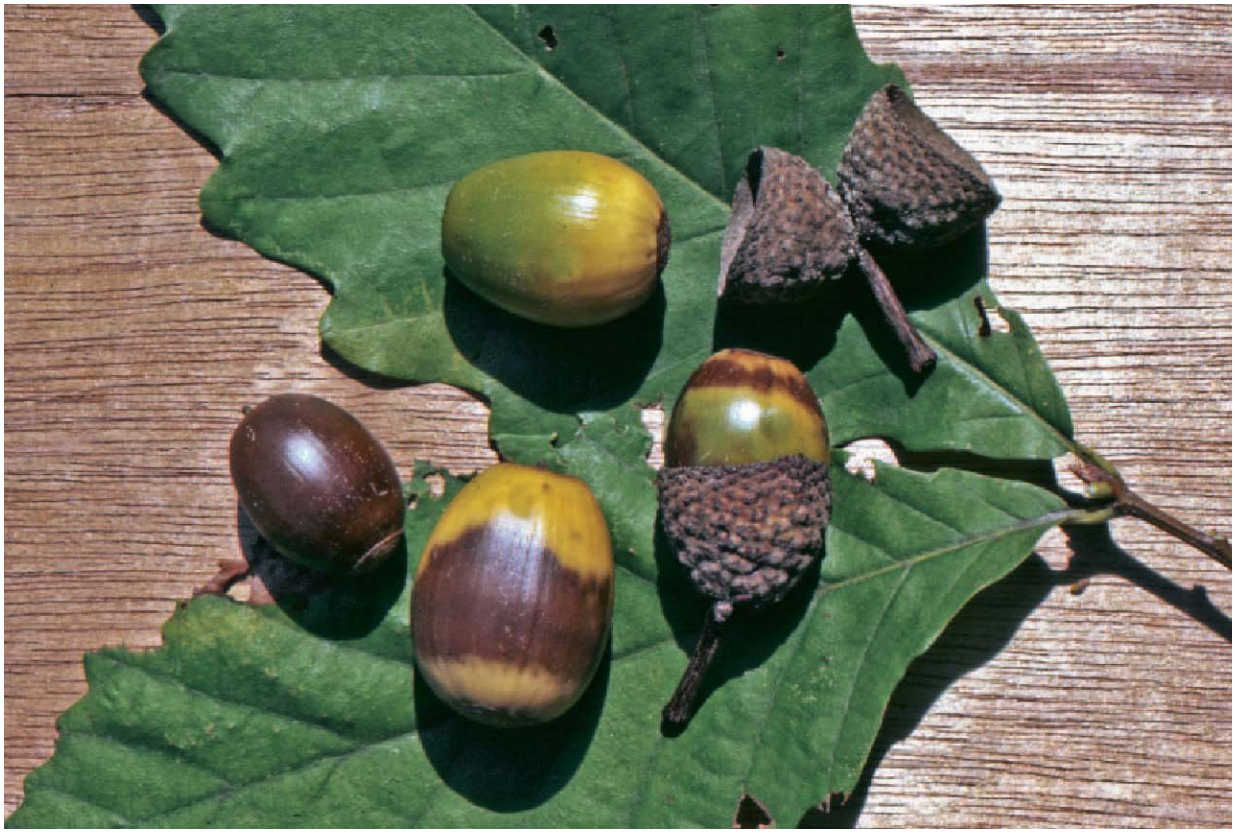
Look at the big picture. You can't fail to notice that the cherry is smooth on its bottom (the end opposite the stem), while the apple has what look like tiny fragments of leaves at its base, and blueberries appear to be open at the base. These are useful identifying characteristics, all described in the following text. Size and color, while useful ways to recognize particular fruits, can mislead you if you don't look at the actual structures of the fruit. Besides, unlike the markets where you see the fruits separated from the plants they grow on, in the wild the plants have useful identifying features, such as the characteristics of their leaves—their shape and texture and whether the leaf edges are smooth or toothed. Then there's how they're patterned on the stem and whether the stems are smooth or have prickles or thorns. Together, these features create a "look" that helps to place the plant you're examining in a recognizable group—and much more successfully so than if you only had the fruit to look at!

Look up and look down. If you walk around just looking at eye level, you'll miss most of what is happening in nature. Ripening fruits on trees are often at the top branches, with the lower boughs ripening a little later. If you don't look up (and binoculars can be helpful here), you'll miss the signs that a particular fruit is ready or nearly ready to be picked. Similarly, if you look down at the ground, it's a good way to notice berries that have fallen. Those that fall on sidewalks often stain the ground and are easily seen. Mulberries and cherries are often found this way. Once you see crushed fruit or juice on the sidewalk, just look up and around to see the fruiting tree.



THE PLANTS

Here is an illustrated guide to the edible nuts, wild fruits, wild greens, and seeds—and the poison ivy group—you are likely to run across in your foraging.



Chestnut oak, a species in the round-lobed leaved white oak group

ACORNS

Native American tribes across northern North America, from the Atlantic to the Pacific, used one or another species of acorn as a staple food. Wars were fought for control of the best oak forests. Today, acorns can be found in markets in Morocco, where they are used as a winter substitute for semolina wheat in making couscous. They are also sold in markets in Korea in ready-to-eat cakes.

COMMON NAME: Acorns

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Quercus* species

PLANT FAMILY: Fagaceae (Beech family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Large trees that have deciduous leaves, typically with either rounded (white oak group) or pointed (red oak group) lobes, or evergreen unlobed leaves, and conspicuous nuts ripe and falling in the early fall. The nuts are called acorns and are set in a cuplike structure from which they are mostly exposed.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: White oak group (oaks with leaves with rounded lobes) acorns mature in a single year; red oak group (oaks with leaves with pointed lobes) acorns take two years to mature. Both are falling by late August and keep falling into October. Squirrels eat most of the white group acorns and bury most of the more astringent red group acorns.

LOOK-ALIKES: No look-alikes exist for oaks bearing acorns.

Black oak, a species in the sharp-lobed leaved red oak group

DISTRIBUTION: Throughout the Northern Hemisphere, but different species exist in western and eastern North America, and in Europe and Asia

USES: Flour for bread and muffins; meal as a meat substitute

NOTES ON METHODS: Given a choice, choose the white oak acorn group over the red, and collect the largest ones you can find. Place acorns in single layer on flat surface indoors. Let them dry out for a few days until the nutmeat separates easily from the shell. Then, crack the shells and boil the nutmeat, changing water every half hour or as the water turns a rusty red. Then roast dry and grind to yield two grades: a fine flour and a coarse, pebblelike product. The flour is used in making muffins; the "pebbles," softened in water, can be mixed with other ingredients, molded like hamburger patties, and cooked as such.

KIDS LOVE BURGERS, EVEN ACORN BURGERS

Although many kids seem to be first in the berry patch, I wondered if kids would eat wild foods that grownups have convinced themselves either taste good or are good for you, or both. Not only were acorns a staple food of Native Americans before corn became available, but they are also still being used as food by people in Europe, Africa, and Asia, so I thought kids might like them if presented in an appealing way. Since hamburgers seem to be one of the most popular foods among the young, why not turn acorns into burgers? I was determined to duplicate a major fast-food chain's burger by replacing the meat with an acorn patty.

I collected the acorns, let them dry for a few days, then shelled them. I boiled these, then roasted them dry and fed them into a meat grinder. The fine grade meal I got went into muffins later, but the gritty pebbles were perfect for the burger. These I soaked to soften, added an onion, seasoned everything, added an egg to hold it together, and then shaped the mixture into patties and sautéed them. These were put on toasted sesame seed buns that had been liberally lathered with "special sauce" I found for sale in a local supermarket. The verdict? The acorn burgers found favor among the fifth graders I invited over for a taste testing. The one criticism I got was not about the acorn burgers; it was about the lack of French fries to go with them. But that's another story.

Black walnuts

BLACK WALNUTS

Walnuts are a predominantly Northern Hemisphere tree genus, but they do occur in the Americas south into Argentina. We are most familiar with the commercial English (or Persian) walnuts, but other varieties, such as the black walnut, show up in prepared foods, such as breads and ice creams, because of their fragrance and flavor. You can also find black walnuts sold shelled at farmers' markets.

COMMON NAME: Black Walnuts

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Juglans nigra*

PLANT FAMILY: Juglandaceae

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Large trees with alternate, compound leaves and large, very fragrant, hard, green fruit developing over the summer and falling in September

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: In early summer, when the fruits are formed, the small green globes are collected immature for pickling and making liquors. In the early fall, when the nuts begin falling, they can be collected in large numbers, often with no predation by small mammals because they are so difficult to open.

LOOK-ALIKES: No look-alikes exist for this large tree with such distinctive fruit.

DISTRIBUTION: Ontario, Canada, south to Florida in eastern North America

USES: As a fragrant nut in breads, cereal, ice cream

NOTES ON METHODS: Wear gloves when collecting and processing black walnuts, as the oil can stain your hands. Black walnuts are easy to gather once they fall to the ground. Let the nuts sit several days in a single layer on a flat surface; this allows the outer husk to soften. Then, wearing gloves, peel away the outer husk, revealing the hard shell. Cracking the shells is hard to accomplish with a nutcracker. Someone recommended placing the nuts in a driveway and running over them with a car. I suggest using a hammer. Place the nuts in a paper bag so the pieces don't go flying about the room. Then use a nut pick to separate.

Shagbark hickory

Mockernut hickory

HICKORY NUTS

The most famous hickory nut is the pecan. Hickory nuts are sold in the fall at roadside stands in the North American Midwest. Native North American Cherokee Indian recipes for kanuchi, a kind of hickory nut soup, are available in the southeastern United States.

Hickory trees are a codominant with oak trees in southeastern North American forests, and they occur from Canada south into Mexico. They also occur in Asia, from China to India. Some species, such as the bitternut hickory, are too bitter, but others, such as the shagbark, are in demand, and can be found already shelled in farmers' markets.

COMMON NAME: Hickory

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Carya* species

PLANT FAMILY: Juglandaceae (Walnut family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Medium-size trees with alternate, compound, toothed leaves and hard-shelled nuts whose husks usually split open, at least partially, on their own

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: Hickory nuts are dropping in late August. Many trees in good years can produce more than can be collected.

LOOK-ALIKES: No look-alikes exist for these trees with this distinctive nut.

DISTRIBUTION: Throughout the Northern Hemisphere

USES: Instead of pecans in pie, cereal, a snack, etc.

NOTES ON METHODS: Hickory nuts within reach can be collected from the tree. Many on the ground can be collected in a good year because there are too many nuts for small mammals to get them all.

Turkish hazelnut

Beaked hazelnut

HAZELNUTS

Nutella, the supermarket staple beside the peanut butter, is a nearly addictive hazelnut spread. It's the way many people are introduced to hazelnuts. Hazelnut is also a common coffee or dessert flavor or add-in. Frangelico is a popular hazelnut-flavored liquor.

COMMON NAME: Hazel, Filbert

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Corylus* species

PLANT FAMILY: Betulaceae (Birch family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Small trees and shrubs with alternate, rounded, toothed leaves and hard-shelled nuts encased in a leafy husk

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: Hazelnuts are hard to see. Because they are encased in a leafy husk, they just look like leaves and are often under or obscured by the regular leaves. Look for them in late August and early September, before they fall.

LOOK-ALIKES: No look-alikes exist for these shrubs with their distinctive leafy husks containing nuts.

DISTRIBUTION: Northern Hemisphere from China across Asia, Turkey, Europe, and North America

USES: As a snack and in cereals, breads, cheesecake

NOTES ON METHODS: Hazelnuts can be collected in their leafy husks before they fall. Once fallen, like many nuts, squirrels and other small mammals will get the lion's share.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Filberts can be found in local supermarkets; also at pick-your-own orchards (regional).

Japanese chestnut

CHESTNUTS

The Christmas season is as much about smells and tastes as it is about buying nonedible presents, and one of the most appealing smells is that of chestnuts being roasted (even by sidewalk vendors in cities). Marron glacé, the candied chestnut that adorns so many holiday dinner tables, is another way to celebrate both the season and the chestnut. Chestnut trees are common in some European and Asian forests, and they were so common in North America that, before the "chestnut blight" struck in the early 1900s, one in four trees in eastern North America was an American chestnut. European and Asian chestnuts are resistant to chestnut blight, a fungal infection, so the chestnuts grown and marketed in America are foreign born and cultivated. The taste and texture, however, whether bought in American markets or picked wild in Black Sea forests in Turkey, is the same.

COMMON NAME: Chestnuts

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Castanea* species

PLANT FAMILY: Fagaceae (Beech family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Tall trees with large, alternate, toothed leaves and conspicuous early-summer, bad-smelling flowers that dangle like worms from the tree, as well as spiny, green fruit balls that are impossible to pick up without gloves

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: Scout out your chestnut trees in the early summer when they're in flower and return in September to collect the nuts. Remember to wear gloves to handle the spiny husks.

LOOK-ALIKES: While horse-chestnut trees do not resemble chestnut trees, their nuts are remarkably similar. The husks of chestnuts have long flexible spines, while those of horse-chestnuts have small, sharp, hard spines. The shells of the seeds, however, look much alike. Both are brown and about the same size. One difference is that horse-chestnuts are shiny shelled, while chestnuts are dull. If you are finding "chestnuts" on the ground in urban and suburban parks in North America, it's a good bet that you are finding horse-chestnuts, which have a very bitter taste and are poisonous.

DISTRIBUTION: Chestnut trees occur throughout the Northern Hemisphere

USES: As a snack, a candied nut, a cooked nut that can be used to complement other foods. The flowers are favored in parts of France for a dark, rich, slightly bitter honey.

NOTES ON METHODS: Wear gloves to collect chestnuts. Step on the fruits to break the husk and separate out the individual nuts. These are then scored and roasted in the oven until the scored opening pulls back to expose the yellowish seed within.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Local supermarkets, street vendors (roasted), pick-your-own orchards (regional)

European beechnuts

BEECHNUTS

Beech trees grow throughout the Northern Hemisphere and as far south as Mexico. Even people who don't know one tree from another know beech trees because these are the smooth, gray-barked trees that they can carve their names on, and there are few such trees in urban and suburban areas that are not so marked. In Europe, beech tree wood is used to flavor beer in Germany, a sheep's milk cheese in Spain, and ham in the Czech Republic. Young leaves are cooked as a potherb and even used to flavor a noyau liquor.

COMMON NAME: Beechnuts

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Fagus* species

PLANT FAMILY: Fagaceae (Beech family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Tall trees with smooth, gray bark; alternate, simple leaves; and dramatically long, sharp-pointed, scaly buds. The fruit is a closed, prickly husk that opens to reveal and disperse several triangular, shiny, brownish seeds.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: Beech trees don't fruit every year, but when they do they are unmistakable and conspicuous because of the countless spiny husks each tree produces.

LOOK-ALIKES: No look-alikes exist for beech trees because beech bark is so distinctive; its smooth, gray bark is nearly always autographed by people.

DISTRIBUTION: North America, Europe, and Asia

USES: As a snack (roasted), made into a flour, an oil, or beechnut butter

NOTES ON METHODS: Beechnuts can be collected on the ground under the tree. Collecting the unopened spiny husks works, and the husks will open on their own at home, but it's an effort to remove the husks from the branches. The triangular seeds can be hit on an edge to crack them open, and a nut pick can remove the nutmeat inside.

Seaside rose hips

ROSES

Roses are known to many as cut flowers for special occasions. There are over a hundred different kinds of roses, and many more cultivars. Roses are woody plants, typically with prickles on their stems, with compound leaves, and with five-petaled white to pink flowers and a strange looking fruit called a hip. Roses are native to Asia, Europe, North America, and even North Africa. Besides their beauty, some roses are renowned for their fragrance, and products such as rose perfumes and rose water or syrup are commonly used in Asia and Europe. Without much effort, roses can be turned into a fragrant jelly, a chilled hot summer's day fruit soup, and a winter's supply of rose-hip tea.

COMMON NAME: Seaside Rose

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Rosa rugosa*

PLANT FAMILY: Rosaceae (Rose family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: A prickly shrub with compound, toothed leaves; large white or pink five-petaled flowers followed by cherry tomato–size, red fruitlike covering called hips that are open at the bottom, and contain a number of small, hairy "seeds," which are actually fruits that contain the seeds.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: Flowers open in late May and flowering continues through August. Rose hips are ripe in August, when red and firm.

Seaside rose flowers

NOT EVEN ROSES ALWAYS COME UP SMELLING LIKE ROSES

Did you ever wonder what it would be like if you could put the fragrance of the rose into a food? Did you ever wonder who might like such a product? I did—the former, not the latter. I tried a number of recipes using rose petals until I found one that really worked. It tasted like roses smell. It was a pretty pink rose petal jam. I thought it was something special. I ate it neat, spooned it on fruit and ice cream, and it had a novel perfumelike flavor. I gave it to some friends, all middle-aged males. Not one really liked it. I decided the problem was not in the product, but my choice of recipients. I should have given it to one of my elderly aunts who maintains a large rose garden. She would have appreciated it. My friends all thought it seemed too much like a cosmetic. Not everything's for everyone.

LOOK-ALIKES: No look-alikes exist; the prickles, flowers, and fruits are unmistakable.

DISTRIBUTION: Native to eastern Asia and common there, especially along sand dunes; Northeastern United States and Canada, also Washington State and Alaska

USES: Jelly, jam, soup, tea

NOTES ON METHODS: Rose hips can be gathered once they are red. The fruits have to be halved and cleaned—that is, both the bottom end and the hairy seeds within removed. Once cleaned, the pulp can be used to make a delicious rose-hip soup or jelly. When using the petals for a jelly, be sure to scissor off the bitterish nub end that is attached to the flower base.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Rose-hip products can be found in supermarkets, under teas and jellies. Various rose products, including rose-hip tea, rose water, and rose-hip preserves, are also sold. Rose-petal jelly is even available to order online!

Wild strawberries

WILD STRAWBERRIES

Everyone in temperate zones, north and south, knows strawberries. They are available year-round thanks to an endless demand for them. Strawberries are so popular that there are dozens of annual festivals across North America, Europe, and elsewhere where people can pick their own, eat an array of prepared foods, and even crown a queen of the local strawberry pageant. (See online listings to find your local festivals.)

Wild strawberries are just one of more than twenty different kinds of strawberries that grow in the United States, Chile and Argentina, Europe, India, Central Asia, the Russian Far East, China, and Japan. Wild strawberries are smaller and much more fragile than commercial strawberries, and have a short fruiting season. Some people believe they are far superior to commercial strawberries, but it depends on the ripeness of the strawberry. It's certainly easier to find commercial strawberries than wild strawberries.

In fact, knowing when wild strawberries are in fruit is no indicator of when to look for them. Wild strawberry fruits grow under their canopy of leaves and are so well hidden that you can be sitting on them without being aware of them until you stand up and notice the red juice stains on your clothes.

The time to *locate* wild strawberries is midspring, when they are in flower and their conspicuous, white, five-petaled flowers are visible. These patches can be revisited two months later when the wild strawberries are ripe.

Picking wild strawberries is stoop labor, if you insist on doing it while standing. The proper stance for collecting wild strawberries is to sit down beside them. Collecting them can be tedious—if you are just collecting. Far better, you should eat them on site, and eat at least as many or more as you collect to take home. The individual fruits, like their huge commercial cousins, have to be cleaned of their leafy green ends, and this can involve breaking the fruit so that the juice runs. This loss can be avoided by making sure the juice runs into your mouth.

Collecting enough to make something with them in the kitchen, other than serving them neat or in cream or over ice cream, involves an hour or more of single-minded picking. A quart of wild strawberries, in this sense, is an expensive use of one's time, and while the cooked product, whether a dessert or

Wild strawberry in flower

Film buffs may have first learned about wild strawberries from Ingmar Bergman's film of that name, or from just about the only happy scene in *The Seventh Seal*, when the actors give the knight a bowl of wild strawberries in cream. This gives the relentlessly spiritual film a very earthy, tasty context. (You might even be willing to change places with the knight for this bowl of wild strawberries, if you didn't already know how the film would end.)

a jam, can be supremely good, you soon discover that none of your friends or family is as likely to adore them as much as you do (because a strawberry is just a strawberry to most people, even those who love you).

COMMON NAME: Wild Strawberry

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Fragaria virginiana*

PLANT FAMILY: Rosaceae (Rose family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Small, low-lying plants, with leaves that are oval and distinctly and regularly toothed, appearing in threes at the end of a slender, hairy stem. Flowers are white, with five petals, five sepals, many stamens, and one pistil. Fruit is a small, red aggregate of fleshy parts with visible imbedded seeds; tastes sweet when ripe.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: Flowers are open by mid-April (in most Northern Hemisphere regions) and last a few weeks—this is the best time to find the plants. The fruit is ripe by early to mid-June and lasts about two weeks. (Higher elevations have later flowering and fruit ripening dates.)

LOOK-ALIKES: (a) Mock strawberry (*Potentilla indica*) has yellow flowers and a look-alike but tasteless, harmless fruit. (b) Dewberries (a species of blackberries, Rubus) have prickles. (c) Poison ivy (*Toxicodendron radicans*) has three leaflets, but they are not regularly toothed and the terminal leaflet has a distinct stem, unlike strawberry leaflets.

DISTRIBUTION: Wild strawberries, of various and almost indistinguishable species, occur throughout the temperate zones of the world. They all share a similar appearance and taste.

USES: Raw or cooked, made into preserves, dried leaves as a tea

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Wild strawberry plants are sold in farmers' markets; wild strawberries are rarely seen for sale.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: **blackberry in flower; wineberry in fruit; cloudberry (a kind of raspberry) in flower; dewberry (a kind of blackberry) in fruit**

BLACKBERRIES AND RASPBERRIES

Blackberries and raspberries are prickly brambles that spill over the sides of paths throughout the temperate zones of the planet. You can come across them bicycling across Ireland, hiking in New Zealand, trekking in the Himalayas, or walking through just about any urban or suburban park. There are too many different species and little agreement on how to differentiate them from one another, but, as blackberries and raspberries, they are unmistakable, given that they are brambles and the fruit is practically unique among the fruits of the world. Cultivated blackberries and raspberries are sold in markets, of course, and you can eat them without having to wade into a dense, thorny thicket, which is likely to draw blood on contact, but you would miss the excitement and the reward of what wild blackberries and raspberries have to offer.

Besides the black blackberries and red raspberries in markets, there are black raspberries, as well as yellow ones, and cloudberries, which grow along mountain trails and are a pale orange. Flavors differ as much as color, and some wild blackberries are wilder than others—that is, they require a sweetener to make them a more appealing edible.

PICKING BLACKBERRIES IS A BLOOD SPORT

Blackberries are easier to find than to pick. Once you locate a bramble full of blackberries, you have to plan how you intend to retrieve them. It will be midsummer and hot and humid, and you'll want to be wearing as little as possible—but there's the rub, or thorn in your side, as it were. Not only will you get cut by the thorns as you push into the bramble, but the mosquitoes will descend on you once you are in, and there's no way to defend yourself against them. You come out with your treasure, but you'll be a bloody mess. Of course, you could wear heavy jeans and leather to ward off the thorns and expose little flesh for the mosquitoes to feast on, but then you'll die from the heat. Picking a quart of wild blackberries is not for the faint of heart, and you should wear your bloody scratches and bites as badges of honor. And never share your blackberries with anyone who doesn't appreciate the blood sacrifice you made to acquire them.

BLACKBERRIES

COMMON NAME: Blackberries, Dewberries

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Rubus* species

PLANT FAMILY: Rosaceae (Rose family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Blackberries have canes with strong prickles and compound, toothed leaves; white, five-petaled flowers; and soft-flesh, bumpy fruits (multiple drupes, each globule containing a single seed) that are green at first, becoming red, and then black when ripe. Dewberries are similar but are a creeping plant.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: Blackberries come into flower in late April, and the fruit is ripe in July, at least at sea level in the north temperate zone.

LOOK-ALIKES: The only look-alike for the fruit is the mulberry, which is a tree, often called a blackberry or raspberry tree by people who have never heard of a mulberry (see the mulberry entry on page 82).

DISTRIBUTION: Throughout the sun-lit temperate zones of the world

USES: Raw fruit, in jelly, ice cream, beverages

NOTES ON METHODS: Wear thick clothing to protect you from the stout prickles that will tear your skin. Collect by hand only those fruits that are firm and black.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Sold in farmers' markets; the blackberries sold in groceries are likely to be very mild-tasting cultivars—pleasant enough, but lacking any "wild" flavor

Wineberries

WINEBERRIES

COMMON NAME: Wineberry

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Rubus phoenicolasius*

PLANT FAMILY: Rosaceae (Rose family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: A cane plant with leaves like blackberries but white underneath (rather than green) and fruit that is red when ripe. Like raspberries, and unlike blackberries, wineberry fruits leave the core on the plant when picked. The canes of wineberries are covered with sticky, reddish hairs.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: Wineberries ripen in early summer (late June to early July), and can be spotted from a distance by their orange-red fruit.

LOOK-ALIKES: No look-alikes exist for these prickly cane plants with raspberrylike fruits

DISTRIBUTION: China, Japan, and Korea; introduced to Europe and North America

USES: Raw fruit, in jelly

NOTES ON METHODS: Pick by hand and only those fruits that come off easily and are firm. A large amount can be picked in a half hour or so.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Not known to be available

Black raspberries

WINEBERRIES AND BASEBALL

I was coaching a youth baseball team. I got to the park early, and on the way I passed some ripe wineberry bushes. I stopped to eat some and then some more. I didn't have a container with me at the time, so I took off my baseball cap and filled it with wineberries. I met up with the team and the other coaches and umpires. I offered everyone some wineberries. I should have known better. Not only were they not interested, but I was told it was not a good thing to do in front of children—that is, pick wild berries to eat—and it was a distraction from what we had gathered there to do—that is, play ball. I turned away from them, ate the berries quickly, put my cap back on, and joined the game. I should have known better, but I enjoyed the berries that day more than anyone there enjoyed that game.

BLACK RASPBERRIES

COMMON NAME: Black Raspberry

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Rubus occidentalis* and *R. leucodermis*

PLANT FAMILY: Rosaceae (Rose family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: A prickly cane plant with a distinct whitish bloom on the canes that can be rubbed off easily. The compound leaves are green above and white underneath. The raspberrylike fruit is green becomes red and then black when ripe.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: The overwintering canes have a conspicuous bloom on them that you can rub off. The fruits ripen in late June and have to be black to be ripe.

LOOK-ALIKES: No look-alikes exist for these prickly cane plants.

DISTRIBUTION: Eastern and Central United States and Canada for *R. occidentalis*; Western North America for *R. leucodermis*; introduced into Europe; a related species is native to China, Korea, and Japan

USES: Raw fruit, in jelly, juice, pies, etc.

NOTES ON METHODS: Pick by hand only those that are black. Black raspberries are more easily gathered than blackberries, which have much stouter prickles.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Sold in farmers' markets; also marketed as a jelly

Black cherries

CHERRIES AND PLUMS

Prunus is the genus that includes cherries and plums, as well as peaches, apricots, almonds, and such well-known cultivars as nectarines. These are sometimes referred to as stone fruits or drupes. There are more than four hundred different species of *Prunus* across the Northern Hemisphere in North America, Europe, and Asia, and some of the best tasting of our wild fruits are our wild cherries and wild plums. Although it would seem that everyone can identify cherries and plums in the marketplace and tell them apart by sight, knowing them to species is a task for a botanist. Most of the cherries in urban and suburban areas are ornamental flowering cherries without conspicuous or even palatable fruit.

One of the tastiest pleasures of summer is the ripening of our cherries. Whether you find them in farmers' markets, at a pick-your-own orchard, or in the wild, sweet cherries and sour cherries are two unbeatable edibles. Sweet cherries (*Prunus avium*) are the ones you eat out of hand, as many as you can. Sour (or tart) cherries (*Prunus cerasus*) are the ones you buy to bake in pies and to make jams and jellies. Both occur in the wild throughout much of the northern temperate zone. Just as some people are excited to see the first cherries come to market, others look for them to ripen along rural lanes and in our nearby woods.

The sale and destruction of the cherry orchard in Chekhov's play of that name was a crushing blow to the family that once owned it. In Bulgaria today, people have to stand guard in their cherry orchards to protect them from cherry thieves who come in the middle of the night in big trucks to cart away the precious fruit.

THE MYSTERY TREE, OR WHY YOU SHOULD NEVER RETIRE YOUR OLD FIELD GUIDES . . .

It was the largest tree in the Shakespeare Garden in New York City's Central Park. It was flowering and, though I couldn't reach the branches, I could see that the small white flowers had five petals and lots of prominent stamens. I guessed it was a *Prunus*, some kind of wild cherry—certainly not an ornamental one because it was a huge tree. I couldn't identify the species, so I asked someone working there. She said, "Oh, that's the mystery tree." When pressed, she said that was what the head of horticulture in the park called it. I met him and he said they just didn't know exactly what kind of *Prunus* it was, but that I could take a branch with me to the New York Botanical Garden (where I teach) and see if anyone there knew it. I was given a 10-foot (3-meter) branch from the tree, which I walked home with, and then took with me by subway up to the Bronx to the botanical garden. When I entered the train, people scattered left and right so they wouldn't get brushed by the twigs and leaves. After I arrived at work, I eventually found the vice president in charge of horticulture, and he named the tree for me within five minutes! It was the St. Lucie cherry, *Prunus mahaleb*, a tree native to the Mediterranean and Central Asia. I learned that it is cultivated for its seeds, which are used as a fragrant spice with a taste like bitter almonds, and that it is used in Turkey and Greece. I also learned, when I got home and searched through my various field guides to trees, that I had an old field guide that included it, but that I shelved it for a newer one that did not include it. Lesson learned: Keep all your field guides accessible.

BLACK CHERRIES

COMMON NAME: Black Cherry, Chokecherry

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Prunus serotina* and *P. virginiana*

PLANT FAMILY: Rosaceae (Rose family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Trees with alternate, simple, toothed leaves; white five-petaled flowers arranged in racemes, followed by blackish drupes (fruit with a single seed)

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: Locate the trees in spring when the they are in flower so you will know where to find them in late summer when they are in ripe and ripening fruit. Black cherries are a common city tree, and the ripe fruit can be readily seen by noticing the black splotches on sidewalks from the fallen fruit in August.

LOOK-ALIKES: No look-alikes exist for trees with racemes of black, single-seeded fruit.

DISTRIBUTION: Chokecherry is one of very few trees that actually occur across North America and is also restricted solely to North America; other cherries are widely distributed across the north temperate world.

USES: Fruit in jelly

NOTE ON METHODS: Pick by hand, often running your hand down the raceme to release a dozen cherries at a time.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Chokecherry marketed as a jelly

Sweet cherries

SWEET CHERRIES

COMMON NAME: Sweet Cherry, Mazzard Cherry

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Prunus avium*

PLANT FAMILY: Rosaceae (Rose family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Small tree with alternate, simple, toothed leaves; with clusters of five-petaled white flowers replaced by clusters of single-seeded red fruits.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: Summer when the fruit is ripe

LOOK-ALIKES: Sour cherries are almost identical except for taste

DISTRIBUTION: Turkey, Europe, northwest Africa, northern North America

USES: Eat out of hand

NOTE ON METHODS: Collect by hand—these are fragile fruits.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Farmers' markets sell fresh sweet cherries in July.

Sour cherries

SOUR CHERRIES

COMMON NAME: Sour Cherry

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Prunus cerasus*

PLANT FAMILY: Rosaceae (Rose family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Small tree with alternate, simple, toothed leaves, and clusters of five-petaled white flowers replaced by clusters of single-seeded red fruits.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: Summer when the fruit is ripe

LOOK-ALIKES: Sweet cherries are almost identical except for taste.

DISTRIBUTION: North American, Europe, south-west Asia

USES: Cooked in pies, jellies, sour cherry soup

NOTE ON METHODS: Collect by hand—these are fragile fruits.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Farmers' markets sell fresh sour cherries in July.

Beach plums

BEACH PLUMS

COMMON NAME: Beach Plum

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Prunus maritima*

PLANT FAMILY: Rosaceae (Rose family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Shrubs grow along Atlantic beaches with alternate, simple, toothed leaves, and five-petaled white flowers with conspicuously long stamens in May, followed by ripening, single-seeded fruit in mid- to late August and early September.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: Look for the shrubs in May when they are covered in white flowers so you will know where to find them in late August and early September when the small, dark-purplish fruits are ripe and often hard to see.

LOOK-ALIKES: No look-alikes exist for a coastal shrub with single-seeded fruit that is likely to be variously colored—some green, others yellowish, reddish, light purplish, or even blue.

DISTRIBUTION: Eastern Canada south to Virginia. This particular plum is restricted to the Atlantic Coast of northeastern North America. Other plums are widely distributed across North America, Europe, and Asia.

USES: Ripe, raw fruit, in jellies and jams, beverages, etc.

NOTES ON METHODS: Pick by hand. When whole branches are ripe, the picking can be fast and furious. When only a few are ripe on any one branch, picking is slow and tedious. No two shrubs are at the same degree of ripeness at the same time.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Sold where they occur in farmers' markets

Juneberry (serviceberry) in fruit . . .

and flower

SERVICEBERRIES, JUNEBERRIES, SASKATOON BERRIES

A little known but choice edible wild berry grows across the north temperate zones of the world. It is most common in North America, where it can be found as shrubs or trees high in the Rocky Mountains or in wooded areas along the Atlantic Ocean. Flowering in April, it is one of the first signs of life in a still leafless spring woods. It got the name serviceberry because its flowering told people in northern places that the ground was soft enough to dig graves to bury people who died over the winter, and then to hold services for them. It's also called shadblow because it flowers about the same time as the shad, a choice seasonal fish, makes its spring run in rivers.

Juneberry is its name in more temperate regions where the fruit ripens in June. Saskatoon berries are a species that grows in the Pacific Northwest, western Canada, and the Rockies, and it's so popular that it's sold in markets across Europe. That there are so many names for this plant is a good sign that it's recognized everywhere, and it's gathered and used in a variety of preparations, from pies to jams to drinks to dried fruit leathers.

COMMON NAME: Serviceberry, Juneberry, etc.

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Amelanchier spp.*

PLANT FAMILY: Rosaceae (Rose family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Small trees with alternate, simple, toothed leaves, and flowers with five widely spaced white petals, followed by green fruit ripening to become red and purple, looking blueberrylike and containing a number of almond-flavored seeds.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: A characteristic widely-spaced, five-petal flower in early April, followed by ripening fruit, changing from green to pink to red to purple in June (at sea level)

LOOK-ALIKES: Blueberries—the fruit—are similar in appearance, but the plants are very different: Blueberry flowers look like little bells, and the leaves are smooth-edged, not toothed.

Juneberries (serviceberries)

One way to tell the fruit apart, when ripe, is that Juneberries are really like very small, soft apples or pears. That is, they're technically known as pomes. All pomes are susceptible to a rust fungus that attacks and destroys the fruit, so that any fruit resembling a pin cushion is instantly recognizable (and no longer collectible).

DISTRIBUTION: Across North America; introduced in Europe

USES: Raw fruit, in pies, jelly, used in pemmican (a dried fruit and nut mix, sometimes with added fat, often put together for hiking trips), etc.

NOTES ON METHODS: Pick carefullu by hand, but this is easily accomplished when the fruit is ripe. A gallon can be picked in an hour.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Some species, like Saskatoon berries, are sold in farmers' markets in the Pacific Northwest and Europe.

SERVICEBERRIES PROVIDE THE SERVICE BERRIES ARE FAMOUS FOR

A walking and bicycling path is being constructed around Manhattan island. However, along this path that runs alongside the Hudson and East Rivers are a profusion of wild plants, a sanctuary for weeds and wildness fringing the city. Here, there are more edible wild plants to be seen during a casual walk than are likely to be found in any woods in the world. Among these wild edibles are stands of small Juneberry trees. Whether the plants are there thanks to birds or the parks department, they thrive along the river's edge and fruit in such quantities that it's almost a crime not to pick them. Even if the birds get all the fruit on top of the 10-foot-tall (3-meter-tall) trees, there is more than enough at arm's reach to satisfy everyone interested in collecting it. Every year, starting the first week of June, I make the rounds of the Juneberries to see how they're ripening. By mid-June, it's not hard to collect a gallon of Juneberries in an hour. While you can gather many more gallons, one is more than enough for all I want to do with the fruit—primarily to make some of the best-tasting pies of the year, which can be frozen and kept for a winter celebration.

Crabapples

Hawthorns

WILD APPLES, CRABAPPLES, AND HAWS

Apples might have originated in Central Asia, but they have since spread throughout the Northern Hemisphere. There are more than 250 different named apples, many of which are cultivars of the 50 or so known species. Fall markets in northern cities across the world are awash in apples coming to market. The old saw about an apple a day keeping the doctor away was taken to heart in an earlier generation, so much so that people who grew apples often lived on them over the winter. Wild apples grow from seeds of cultivated apples, and they are often gnarled and festooned with insects and fungi. Still, they are a treat to find. Crabapples are small ornamental trees selected primarily for their floral display in the spring, but bringing to fall the ripening of bunches of very small red, orange, or yellow apple-like fruit. Hawthorns are like crabapples with thorns. The fruit is much the same as apples, and though the leaves are somewhat different, as are the flowers, the presence of the long, sharp, sturdy thorns is enough for any nonspecialist to recognize a hawthorn.

WILD APPLES AND CRABAPPLES

COMMON NAME: Wild Apples, Crabapples

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Malus spp.*

PLANT FAMILY: Rosaceae (Rose family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Usually small trees with alternate, simple, toothed leaves, and five-petaled white to pink flowers, followed by green, red, or yellow apples—large or very small—in the early fall

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: Look for the trees in flower in late April–early May, then the ripe fruit in September.

LOOK-ALIKES: No look-alikes exist for apples or crabapples

DISTRIBUTION: Wherever apples grow wild, are cultivated, or where animals disperse the seeds

Wild apples

USES: Fruit in jelly and preserves, pickled

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Sold in farmers' markets; marketed as a jelly, butter, etc.

HAWTHORNS

COMMON NAME: Hawthorn

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Crataegus spp.*

PLANT FAMILY: Rosaceae (Rose family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Small trees with long, sharp thorns on the branches; alternate, simple, toothed, often lobed leaves; and five-petaled white flowers followed by applelike red fruit in the fall

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: Look in the early fall for the ripe red fruit

LOOK-ALIKES: No look-alikes exist for a thorny tree with applelike fruit.

DISTRIBUTION: Across the Northern Hemisphere, either wild or as ornamentals in parks

USES: Fruit in jelly

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Available as jellies in farmers' markets

A bowl of mulberries

MULBERRIES

When the mulberry fruits are red and falling off the tree, it's not unusual for people to think they're seeing the "raspberry tree," since they share a general appearance and color with that berry. Raspberries, of course, grow on canes, not trees, and mulberries grow on trees, not bushes. In North America, where the white mulberry was introduced in a failed attempt to start a silkworm industry, mulberries are a weed tree. In other parts of the world, though, mulberries are highly esteemed, and not infrequently sold in local markets in Asia.

COMMON NAME: Mulberry

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Morus spp.*

PLANT FAMILY: Moraceae (Mulberry family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Tall trees with distinctively orange bark seen at their base, with alternate, simple, toothed, often elaborately lobed leaves, and with short conelike flowers, followed by blackberry- or raspberrylike fruit that can be off-white, pinkish, reddish, or black when ripe; the fruit shows conspicuous pistils sticking out of the fleshy fruit matrix, often looking like insect parts.

Mulberries

TREES GROW UP, TOO

I gather mulberries from trees in city parks. At first I couldn't understand why only some mulberry trees produced fruit, but that was before I understood that these trees, like a number of other plants, are either male or female. The trees look the same, except that only the females produce mulberries. I quickly learned that any ten trees that do produce mulberries produce very different qualities of fruit. Some are more tart, some sweet, some rather bland. So, it's a matter of finding a female mulberry, and finding one whose fruit you like to eat. After quite a few years, I returned to a mulberry tree that I remembered having the finest tasting fruit in the area. It was a shock to discover that just like us, mulberry trees grow up. The tree whose branches I could easily reach at one time was now way above my head. I could stand under it and gaze up at the fruit, but I couldn't reach any of it, even to shake a branch to let the fruit rain down on me. It served me right for waiting so long to return to this tree.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: You can usually find mulberries on sidewalks in mid- to late June. When you do, look up to see the fruit in the tree.

LOOK-ALIKES: Occasionally referred to as a blackberry or raspberry tree by casual observers

DISTRIBUTION: Across North America except for Alaska and adjacent Canadian states; in Europe and Asia, either native or introduced

USES: Raw fruit, in jelly, pies, ice cream

NOTES ON METHODS: The easiest way to collect mulberries is to place a drop cloth on the ground below the tree and shake the branches. The mass of fruit and twigs that fall can be gathered up and placed in a sink full of cold water, where the fruit can be readily separated from any debris.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Sold by street vendors throughout much of Asia (e.g., India, Indonesia); also sold dried in the West.

BLUEBERRIES

Blueberries are one of the favorite fruits of summer. Just as cultivated blueberries are ripening, wild blueberries are, too. They tend to be much smaller, but they are no less abundant where they grow. Lowbush blueberries and the related but much seedier huckleberries favor acid soils, such as that in eastern North American woodlands, and miles of hiking trails pass alongside these low-growing shrubs. Highbush blueberries are tall shrubs that are often planted in urban and suburban parks. Both kinds can produce vast quantities of berries. There are more than four hundred different species of *Vaccinium* distributed across the Northern Hemisphere. Most have blue-colored berries, but there are red-berried plants, as well, such as the lingonberry and the bog-inhabiting and mountain cranberries. Names for different kinds of *Vacciniums* are legion; for example, there's bilberry, deerberry, sparkleberry, whortleberry, and so on.

COMMON NAME: Blueberry (Highbush and Lowbush)

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Vaccinium corymbosum* (highbush blueberry) and *Vaccinium angustifolium* (lowbush blueberry)

PLANT FAMILY: Ericaceae (Heath family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Small trees or low-growing shrubs with alternate, simple, smooth-edged leaves; white bell-shaped flowers in spring, and many tiny, seeded blue berries in summer

Blueberry in flower

Blueberry in leaf and fruit

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: The bell-shaped flowers are easy to spot in spring and locate places to return to for the ripe fruit over summer. Highbush blueberries are often found in wet woods or near streams, while lowbush blueberries are common in drier terrain.

LOOK-ALIKES: Huckleberries (species of the related and equally edible *Gaylussacia* genus) contain ten or so large nutlets rather than tiny seeds.

DISTRIBUTION: Eastern North America from Nova Scotia to Texas, and the Pacific Northwest. *Vaccinium* is a genus common throughout the north temperate zone in North America, Europe, and Asia. (Children in the Russian Far East spend late summer afternoons picking blueberries.)

USES: Raw fruit, in pies, jelly, beverages, etc.

NOTES ON METHODS: Blueberries can be collected by the gallon when ripe. All that's needed is the patience and self-discipline to collect more than you eat out of hand.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Sold in farmers' markets

Cranberries

Cranberry in flower

CRANBERRIES

Cranberry is familiar as a sauce with various meats, such as turkey, eaten during late fall holidays, such as the American Thanksgiving dinner and the English Christmas dinner. Cranberry juice is also a popular beverage. Neither of these sugared products, however, reveals the true taste of cranberries, which is not a sweet fruit. It's one of the most sour-bitter edible fruits on the planet. Commercial cranberries are cultivated in beds flooded before harvesting. Wild cranberries are often found in mountainous areas in small patches producing little in the way of volume, but more than enough in flavor.

COMMON NAME: Cranberries

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Vaccinium spp.*

PLANT FAMILY: Ericaceae (Heath family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: A low-growing, creeping evergreen shrub with small, ovate, alternate, simple, untoothed leathery leaves; small, nodding bell-shaped flowers; and single red, bitterish berries. Cranberries, blueberries, and huckleberries are in the same family.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: Late summer and fall when bog cranberries are ripe

LOOK-ALIKES: While there are other red berries, nothing resembles the cranberry plant in leaf, flower, and fruit.

DISTRIBUTION: Acid bogs throughout the northern and higher parts of the Northern Hemisphere

USES: Fruit cooked and sweetened as a juice or sauce

NOTE ON METHODS: Collect by hand.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Cultivated cranberries are harvested in the fall and sold fresh in markets.

Ground cherry fruit

Garden ground cherry

GROUND CHERRIES

Some people have Chinese lanterns growing in their garden or as part of a dried plant arrangement in their homes. This is a species of *Physalis*, the genus of ground cherry. Another is the tomatillo that is sold in markets and is an important ingredient in various green sauces in Latin American dishes. There are many wild species of ground cherry, and recognizing them in fruit is easy as ground cherry pie is to make.

COMMON NAME: Ground Cherry, Tomatillo, Husk Tomato

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Physalis spp.*

PLANT FAMILY: Solanaceae (Nightshade family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Small, alternate, toothed, oblong leaves with white, nodding bell-shaped flowers followed by a unique papery, greenish husk enclosing a many-seeded yellowish berry

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: Late summer when the fruit is ripe

LOOK-ALIKES: No other plant has a paperlike husk covering its berry.

DISTRIBUTION: Western Hemisphere

USES: In sauces (salsa), pies

NOTE ON METHODS: Collect by hand and remove the papery husks.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Different species are sold in farmers' markets as garden plants and food plants; tomatillos are sold in many groceries now.

Concord grapes

Fox grape showing distinctive white underside of leaf

WILD GRAPES

Grapes grow over much of the Northern Hemisphere, and there are perhaps more than fifty different species in North America, Europe, and Asia. Wild grapes turn up just about anywhere that birds that have eaten the fruits excrete the seeds.

Grapes are a two-season collectible. The young leaves are used in making stuffed grape leaves, and the berries are, well, grapes. There are summer grapes and autumn grapes, so the season might be limited by species, but there's always another kind out there to find at another time.

Concord grapes are a cultivar of the common wild fox grape, *Vitis labrusca,* of eastern North America. Other grapes have smaller fruit or they fruit in the fall rather than late summer. European wine grapes are a different species. It's hard to imagine Western civilization as we know it without grape wine.

COMMON NAME: Fox Grape

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Vitis labrusca*

PLANT FAMILY: Vitaceae (Grape family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Vinelike shrubs with simple, lobed leaves that are green above and conspicuously white below; with a tendril or flower cluster at every node; and with fruit that is dark purple when ripe

Fall grapes

WHY DOES THIS GRAPE HAVE SEEDS?

City kids today are more likely to be familiar with the readily available bunches of green and red seedless grapes that are sold by street vendors and in supermarkets. Seedless grapes can be eaten by the handful with no fuss. They don't even seem like a natural product because they are seedless. Grapes sold in farmers' markets and wild grapes come with seeds, things that are just too big to ignore. Kids will enjoy picking wild grapes, and if you're in luck, they will eat them, too, even if it's just an opportunity to spit the seeds at one another.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: The green leaves are white on the underside, which makes them distinguishable from any grapelike look-alikes.

LOOK-ALIKES: Look-alike vines include the Virginia creeper and porcelain berry, neither of which has edible fruit, but the fox grape has leaves with very white undersides, unlike any other vine—even other grape vines.

DISTRIBUTION: Eastern North America. This particular grape is restricted to eastern North America, but other species occur throughout North America, Europe, and Asia.

USES: Young leaves, to stuff; raw fruit, cooked, in jelly

NOTES ON METHODS: Grapes can be gathered as easily as they come off the vine, sometimes by the handful when ripe.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Sold in farmers' markets

Elderberries

Elderberry in flower

ELDERBERRIES

Ask anyone about elderberries and you're likely to hear about something called elderberry wine or liquor. Different species of black-berried elders are a common sight in urban and suburban sunny areas throughout the Northern Hemisphere. The flowers can be made into a late-spring celebratory alcoholic beverage. Just as elderberries can be made into numerous beverages, they can also be used as food: At least one Native American people subsisted on dried elderberries, which they rehydrated and made into numerous tasty dishes.

Red-bellied elders are common in some places. Disagreement about their digestibility suggests caution in considering them an acceptable edible.

COMMON NAME: Elderberry

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Sambucus nigra* (black-berried elder complex)

PLANT FAMILY: Adoxaceae (Moschatel family; formerly Caprifoliaceae, Honeysuckle family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Shrubs with opposite, compound, toothed leaves, with umbels of flat-topped white flowers in June followed by masses of black, seedy berries in August.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: Flowers in June; fruit ripens in late July and August

LOOK-ALIKES: No known look-alikes exist for umbels of black berries on shrubs with opposite, compound, toothed, leaves.

DISTRIBUTION: The black-berried elderberry complex occurs across the Northern Hemisphere, and down into South America. *Sambucus nigra* occurs in the United States in all areas but the Pacific Northwest.

USES: Flowers are batter-fried, used in making an alcoholic beverage; fruit is used in jellies and wines.

NOTES ON METHODS: Easily gathered by cutting the umbel stems so the cluster is collected whole and unbruised.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Sold in farmers' markets as jelly

Sumac fruit

SUMAC, RHUS-JUICE

It might seem odd that a plant family that includes poison ivy, poison sumac, and poison oak, could also include several choice edibles—but it does. Cashew and pistachio nuts, as well as mangoes, are in the Cashew family (Anacardiaceae). Not surprisingly, mango trees contain the same rash-causing sap that is found in poison ivy, but the fruit is harmless to most people. Cashew nuts are sold, as are the fruits to which the nuts are attached. The cashew apples, as they are called, are canned and sold in Hispanic markets. Then there are the sumacs that line many highways and roadsides. These are the large, bright red, cone-shaped fruits that first become noticeable in late June. When they are ripe, usually during August, they are collected to make a lemonadelike beverage that is one of the most refreshing nonalcoholic summer drinks known. Sumac occurs in temperate and subtropical regions in North America and Mediterranean countries. It is used in as a sour seasoning in hummus and baba ghanoush, in salads, and in a ubiquitous Middle Eastern powdered seasoning called zaatar.

COMMON NAME: Smooth and Staghorn Sumac

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Rhus glabra* and *Rhus typhina*

PLANT FAMILY: Anacardiaceae (Cashew family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Shrubs with either smooth or wooly branches, and compound leaves with many toothed leaflets; with fuzzy red, erect fruit cones developing in the summer

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: In mid to late summer, look for the cones, which are bright red and conspicuous along most roadsides and waste areas, usually in dry areas.

LOOK-ALIKES: No look-alikes exist for the fuzzy red cones that appear in midsummer. Poison sumac is a wetland plant, usually a small tree, that has similar leaves but produces clusters of white berries rather than red cones.

DISTRIBUTION: Throughout North America as a roadside weed; native to North America

USES: Fruit made into a beverage

NOTES ON METHODS: The cones, when ripe, can be readily broken from the plant. The cones are placed in containers of water, four cones per quart, and shaken for five to ten minutes, then strained and sweetened as desired.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Fruit is sold in farmers' markets.

Kousa dogwood in fruit

EDIBLE DOGWOODS

The pretty, white, and fairly ubiquitous flowering dogwood is for many in eastern North America the quintessential sign of spring. Before it opens, however, another dogwood, the Cornelian cherry, has put out its mass of tiny, bright-yellow flowers in late winter, as sure a harbinger of spring as anything can be. The Cornelian cherry is a native of southern Europe that finds a home to its liking as an ornamental throughout the Northern Hemisphere. Its fruit in late summer resembles a cherry enough to earn the tree its common name. Another ornamental dogwood, the Kousa dogwood, opens its flowering dogwoodlike bracts after the flowerlike bracts of the flowering dogwood have dropped. Later in the year, usually in early September, the Kousa dogwood's somewhat mulberrylike fruits have reddened, and it's then that people can harvest them as a nibble, or even turn them into a jelly.

Cornelian cherry (a dogwood) in fruit

CORNELIAN CHERRIES

COMMON NAME: Cornelian Cherry, European Cornel

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Cornus mas*

PLANT FAMILY: Cornaceae (Dogwood family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Small trees with opposite, simple, untoothed leaves with distinctively bow-shaped veins, and with masses of small yellow flowers in late winter, followed by small, oblong, cherrylike fruit in late summer.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: Small park trees covered with small, yellow, four-petaled flowers in late winter and red, cherrylike fruit in late summer

LOOK-ALIKES: Perhaps cherry trees resemble this tree, but Cornelian cherry leaves are opposite and smooth edged.

DISTRIBUTION: Southern Europe, southwest Asia; introduced in North America as an ornamental, and common now in northern urban and suburban areas

USES: Raw fruit, in jellies

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Sold as a jelly in Russian groceries

Kousa dogwood fruit

KOUSA DOGWOODS

COMMON NAME: Kousa Dogwood, Japanese Dogwood

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Cornus kousa*

PLANT FAMILY: Cornaceae (Dogwood family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Small trees with opposite, simple, untoothed leaves with distinctively bow-shaped veins, and with large white flowerlike bracts (similar to a flowering dogwood) surrounding the small flowers in midspring, followed by a raspberrylike, many-seeded, pulpy fruit in the fall

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: The fruit is ripe in the fall when it turns red and is soft and fleshy.

LOOK-ALIKES: Nothing resembles the fruit of the Kousa dogwood

DISTRIBUTION: East Asia; introduced in the United States

ALWAYS BE OPEN TO LEARN FROM OTHERS

The Cornelian cherry is an ornamental flowering dogwood that produces a cherrylike red fruit in late summer. The yellow flowers of this small shrub are one of the first flowers to open in late winter in urban and suburban parks. The fruit, although conspicuous in years when it's produced abundantly, is ignored by nearly everyone. Still, a Cornelian cherry jelly is sold in Russian markets in New York City. The fruit on the shrub is tart and hard fleshed. I found, however, that it can be cooked a bit to soften, and the stones can be removed by hand rather quickly. After passing it through a food mill to separate the seeds from the pulp, the cleaned juice can be made into a very pretty and tasty Cornelian cherry jelly, something I might not have done had I not, by chance, seen it for sale in a Russian market. Seeing what other people do with foods you might have only seen as plants can be a marvelous learning experience, something you might be able to use with other plants you find.

USES: Fruit out of hand as a nibble; made into a jelly

NOTES ON METHODS: Collect individually by hand.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Not available as fruit; sold as trees in nurseries and catalogs

Pawpaw fruit

PAWPAWS, CUSTARD APPLES

The Custard Apple family is primarily a family of tropical plants, and where the fruits are found they are relished. Cherimoya tarts are a popular feature in restaurants in Peru. Sweetsop and soursop are two other popular tropical edibles in this family. But in North America there is a native plant called the pawpaw. It bears a large, elongated, rounded, asymmetrical fruit. When ripe, it has a taste of the tropics, a soft custardy texture, and a flavor combination of bananas, mangoes, and pineapple.

COMMON NAME: Pawpaw, Indiana Banana

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Asimina triloba*

PLANT FAMILY: Annonaceae (Custard Apple family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Small trees with simple, large, alternate, smooth-edged leaves; with a small, chocolate-reddish six-petaled flower, followed by a greenish bananalike fruit

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: The fruit is ripe around the beginning of September. It ripens on the tree—that is, it turns blackish—or it falls to the ground and ripens there.

LOOK-ALIKES: There are no pawpaw look-alikes.

DISTRIBUTION: Eastern North America, Ontario south to Florida, west to Texas; native to North America

USES: Ripe fruit eaten raw, used in pie, drinks, etc.

NOTES ON METHODS: Collected by hand, either on the tree or from the ground. If still green, the fruit can be stored in the refrigerator to continue the ripening process. The blackened ripe fruit can be cut open and the custard pulp scooped out and eaten raw.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Cultivated and wild tropical members of this family are sold in upscale markets and throughout the tropics.

Mayapple in flower

Mayapple fruit

MAYAPPLES

When all parts of a plant are poisonous except the ripe fruit, it had better be good. Mayapple is just that. Next to the pawpaw, it's the most tropical tasting of nontropical fruits. Mayapples taste like a mix of mango, banana, and papaya. Their name is a misnomer because they don't produce an apple in May; they flower in May and produce a smooth, greenish, oval fruit ripening to yellow in July.

COMMON NAME: Mayapple

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Podophyllum peltatum*

PLANT FAMILY: Berberidaceae (Barberry family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Plants appear in early May as little green umbrellas, soon flattening out to reveal segmented leaves. A white six- to nine-petaled flower appears at the junction of two-leaved plants, followed by an oval greenish fruit, becoming yellowish on ripening. Single-leaved plants do not produce flowers or fruit.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: The plants emerge from the ground in early May, resembling stands of little umbrellas opening in shady woods. The flowers and fruits are under the leaves and hard to see unless sought out.

LOOK-ALIKES: No look-alikes exist.

DISTRIBUTION: Eastern North America, Quebec to Florida, west to Texas; native to North America

USES: Ripe fruit in jelly, pie (caition: unripe fruits can cause cramps)

NOTES ON METHODS: When fruiting in numbers, mayapples are easily gathered, but often only a few are found in any one patch. The fruit is readily pulped using a food mill and can then be used or frozen for later.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Plants are sold in farmers' markets.

Wild persimmons

PERSIMMONS

If you didn't grow up in an area where persimmon trees were common, it's unlikely that you ever ate any as a child. Still, in children's stories about Brer Rabbit, one can find references to persimmons and Brer Rabbit's devious attempts to convince others to get them down from the tall persimmon trees for him. Wild persimmons are usually so astringent before a hard frost that few people care for them, even though, when perfectly ripe, they are one of the best edible wild fruits available. Seeing a market for a better product, Japan has developed persimmons that can be eaten anytime, straight from the tree. Japanese persimmons have come into Western markets so people who know only these cannot know either the puckery nature of wild persimmons or their lusciousness when fully ripe.

COMMON NAME: Persimmon

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Disopyros virginiana*

PLANT FAMILY: Ebenaceae (Ebony family)

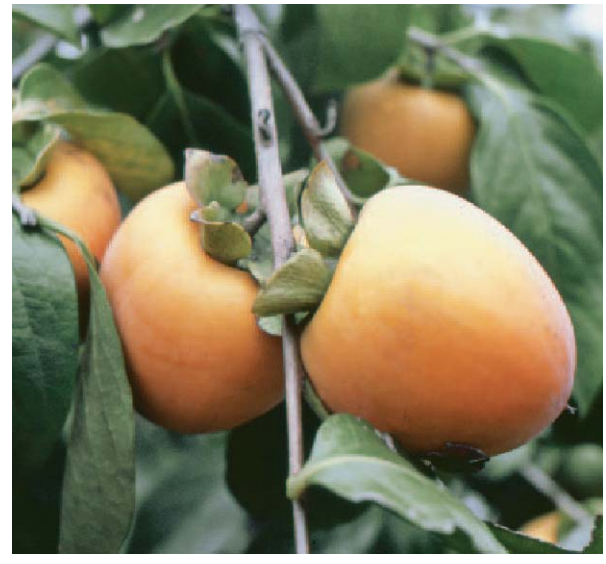
FIELD DESCRIPTION: Tall forest trees with distinctively deeply fissured, segmented bark; with alternate, oblong, smooth-edged leaves; with female trees bearing fleshy, 1-inch-diameter (2.5-centimeter-diameter) orange to yellowish seedy fruits.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: Fruit ripens in the fall and can be harvested off the ground if branches cannot be reached. From December on, the fruit is less puckery, but a frost is needed to make it sweet enough to enjoy.

TOO PUCKERY FOR WORDS

My wife and I were walking on a woodland trail in a city park one autumn. The leaves were starting to fall. Looking at the colorful leaves on the ground, all the yellows and oranges and a few reds, something roundish caught our attention. Persimmons! Nothing looks like them. These are much smaller than the cultivated ones sold in the markets, and on closer inspection we saw more and more hidden by the fallen leaves. Some were still green, some yellowish, some orange, some still hard and others squishy already. Looking about, we realized we were in a persimmon woods—twenty or more tall trees were around us, all with their branches so far above our heads that we failed to notice any leaves at all. Persimmon trunks are unique in that they almost look like prehistoric reptile legs, with a deeply fissured, scalelike, segmented pattern, unlike any other tree trunk in the woods. Tasting wild persimmons is always a challenge. How sweet will it be? Will the sweetness be overwhelmed by its unripe astringency? A couple were sampled and were quite good, but with a slowly realized astringency—that is, our mouths felt so dry we wondered how that could happen.

A little experimenting with persimmons will show that the pulp is mostly sweet and the skin is largely astringent. Putting them in the freezer for a while helps. Once you thaw them, squeeze out the pulp and separate the seeds. Persimmons make killer cakes, and mixed with black walnuts, they can make a coffee cake unrivaled in the annals of cuisine.



Japanese persimmon

LOOK-ALIKES: No look-alikes exist for persimmons.

DISTRIBUTION: North America, New York south to Florida and west to California. The local wild species in North America has related species growing across much of the Northern Hemisphere.

USES: Ripe fruit raw, in puddings, baked goods, etc. Freeze whole and then thaw slightly, peel, and eat.

NOTE ON METHODS: Most easily gathered on the ground as soon as possible after an early winter storm knocks them down.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Cultivated persimmons are sold in markets. Wild persimmons are sold in farmers' markets where they are found in quantity locally.

Wild red gooseberries

Wild black gooseberries

CURRANTS AND GOOSEBERRIES

Many people of a certain age remember eating gooseberry pie when they were growing up. That was before it was discovered that currants and gooseberries were host to a rust fungus that attacked the economically valuable eastern white pine tree. Currants and gooseberries were eradicated from eastern North America. Now, decades later, rust-resistant cultivars are being planted, and currants and gooseberries have returned to the marketplace. Elsewhere in North America and Europe, where currants and gooseberries grow in profusion, there has been a constant supply for the demand for these vaguely bitter sour fruits. Many grownups who would otherwise never recognize currants know cassis, the liquor made from black currants.

COMMON NAME: Spiny-fruit Gooseberry

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Ribes sp.*

PLANT FAMILY: Grossulariaceae (Gooseberry family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Small shrubs often in mountainous terrain, with alternate, lobed, toothed leaves and spiny branches, with spinelike hairy fruit in a couple of gooseberry species. Gooseberries when ripe can be green to red, even black. Currants are similar but thornless and have red to black berries (or various in cultivated forms).

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: The fruits ripen in summer and can be red or black, depending on the species.

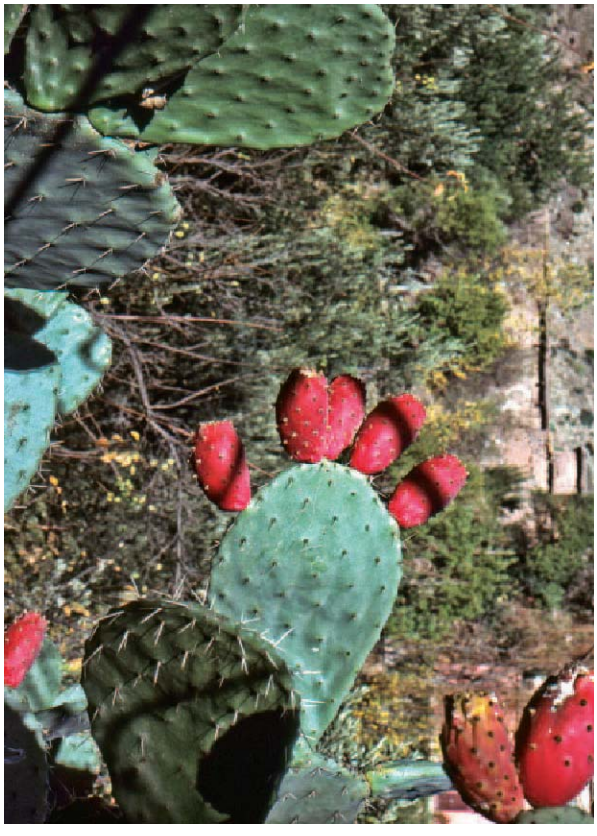
LOOK-ALIKES: Prickly gooseberries have no look-alikes; currants require attention to detail because there are a good many red-berried shrubs in the wild.

DISTRIBUTION: Northern Hemisphere across North America and Europe, as well as western and southeastern Asia, mostly in mountainous habitats

USES: Fruit in jelly, pies, beverages; cassis sherbet

NOTES ON METHODS: Pick by hand.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Cultivated currants and gooseberries are sold in farmers' markets.



Prickly pear pads and fruit

PRICKLY PEAR

Prickly pear is a cactus and, while cacti are New World plants and primarily restricted to arid regions, they can be found growing in many other places. One species is native to northeastern North America, and it is found growing, even thriving, in New York City. In Southern Europe and North Africa, where the climate is similarly arid, cacti are frequently introduced, so they can no longer be considered a local wild food plant. Over two hundred species of cacti occur throughout North, Central, and South America, and many of these have been used for food, as well as reservoirs of water in the desert. Prickly pear is a particular kind of cactus whose padlike leaves have an iconic, round shape.

COMMON NAME: Prickly Pear

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Opuntia spp.*

PLANT FAMILY: Cactaceae (Cactus family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Flat padlike leaves covered with spines and clumps of hard-to-see prickles. The showy yellow flowers are followed by bright red oval bumpy fruits.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: Prickly pear cactus puts out large yellow flowers in early summer and small, tough-skinned red fruits in the fall.

LOOK-ALIKES: No look-alikes exist for the prickly pear.

DISTRIBUTION: Southwestern United States, one species native to northeastern North America; native to North America, but found cultivated and naturalized in parts of Europe, Asia, and North Africa

USES: Pads as a cooked green; raw fruit; made into jelly, a beverage

NOTES ON METHODS: Caution: Wear gloves to harvest. The pads can be used once they are cleaned of their spines and clusters of tiny prickles. When cooked, the pads have the texture of okra: firm on the outside, creamy within. The fruit, when peeled, can be sliced into fruit salads or made into jelly.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Pads (nopales) and fruits are sold in both farmers' markets and big supermarkets.

Ginkgo fruit

GINKGO

If you've eaten in a Chinese restaurant, you've likely seen a dish called Buddha's Delight, a mixture of vegetables that includes ginkgo nuts, which look and taste remarkably like chickpeas. Ginkgo nuts are so important in Chinese culture that they are an essential part of the food eaten during Chinese New Year celebrations. Ginkgo nuts are available in Chinese markets in cans, but it's in the parks and along the streets of Northern Hemisphere cities that one is mostly likely to encounter them. Ginkgo is not known to occur in the wild, and it is as a monastery tree that was discovered, brought out of China, and distributed throughout Northern Hemisphere areas where it has been found to be especially good in warding off the deleterious effects of pollution. As a result, ginkgo trees have become one of the most common street trees in places like northern U.S. cities. The ginkgo is mostly known for its smelly fruits that fall on city sidewalks and force pedestrians into the street to avoid walking on them and, perhaps, slipping. Like a few other plants, ginkgo has male and female trees, the fruits being born, of course, on the female trees. (See the caution note below about handling the fruit.)

AND I THOUGHT THE SMELL WAS BAD!

I saw Chinese people gathering ginkgo nuts in the park one fall. Whole families, including the children, were squatting under particular trees and cleaning and bagging lots of ginkgo nuts. This smelly fruit didn't appeal to me because I remembered, when I was growing up, trying to avoid stepping on the slippery, squishy, smelly fruits that fell on sidewalks on my way to school. Still, I thought if even children could engage in this pursuit, so could I. I found a tree that no Chinese family had claimed as theirs, and settled under it to collect the ginkgos. I didn't bother cleaning them on site because I wanted to do it at home by a sink where I could wash the smelly, fleshy pulp off my hands. Once home, I quickly cleaned a quart or so. I read that the shells had to be cracked open and the seeds roasted. I did that, then cleaned up. When I tried the roasted seeds, I found them unremarkable. They reminded me of chickpeas, but I wrote them off as a culture-bound food, not something of general interest, even though I enjoyed eating them in Chinese dishes at restaurants.

A day or so later I noticed a rash developing. I thought it must be poison ivy, though couldn't remember being near any. The rash was eventually diagnosed as coming from the aril (thin covering over the seed) of this plant. The rash cleared up in about two weeks, but it scarred my memory of this truly ancient, graceful, leafy tree.

COMMON NAME: Ginkgo

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Ginkgo biloba*

PLANT FAMILY: Ginkgoaceae (Ginkgo family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Ginkgo is an ornamental planted as a street and park tree throughout much of the Northern Hemisphere. The leaves are fan shaped. The trees are either male or female; the male trees tend to be more vertical; the female, bearing the fruit, has branches that are more horizontal. The fruit is fleshy and foul smelling, dropping in great numbers in mid- to late fall.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: Ginkgo "nuts" are gathered when the fruit is on the ground. The fruit starts dropping in mid-fall, and peaks in late fall. Look-alikes: No look-alikes exist for ginkgo leaves.

DISTRIBUTION: China, but planted throughout northern temperate zones in urban and suburban areas

USES: Nut (processed and used in moderation)

NOTES ON METHODS: **Caution**: Wearing gloves, remove the soft fleshy outer part to reveal a nut-like shell. This is cracked open to expose a seed enclosed in a thin membrane (aril). Care is needed here, because some people, even those who can eat ginkgo nuts in Chinese restaurants, are allergic to the unprocessed fruit and can get an unpleasant rash.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Available in Chinese markets in cans, as well as ingredients on the menu in Chinese restaurants

Spicebush fruit

SPICEBUSH

Ancient trade routes connected the spices of the Eastern world with the markets in the West. But what happens if those spices are suddenly no longer available? People often find local alternatives. Just such a one is wild allspice, a small tree that grows near water in eastern North America, and produces a berry that, when crushed, can be used as "allspice" in the kitchen.

There are one hundred species of shrubs and small trees that are native to eastern Asia and eastern North America in the genus *Lindera*. Spicebush, *Lindera benzoin*, is in the Laurel family, as are sassafras, avocado, bay laurel, and cinnamon. The Laurel family contains plants rich in aromatic oils, which are used as spices and in making perfumes.

COMMON NAME: Spicebush

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Lindera benzoin*

PLANT FAMILY: Lauraceae (Laurel family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Dioecious shrubs—that is, there are male and female plants—with yellow flowers appearing before the leaves emerge in April, but only the female plants produce the red berries in the fall; with leaves that are simple, unlobed, smooth edged, and alternate on the branches, which are conspicuously dotted

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: The flowers appear in late April and early May in wet woods, and this is the time to find the small shrubs. In late summer and early fall the fruits turn red and become conspicuous on the branches, and this is the time to gather them.

LOOK-ALIKES: No look-alikes exist once the lenticel-dotted branches are seen and then scraped to smell the spicy aroma.

DISTRIBUTION: The United States from Maine to Florida, west to Texas. This particular species is native to North America, but other species occur in the Americas and eastern Asia.

USES: Tea, powdered fruits as spice for seasoning food, in spice cake, icings

NOTES ON METHODS: Collecting spicebush berries only requires finding one or two female bushes filled with ripe red fruit in the early fall. Dry berries, powder, and store.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Not known to be available

Wintergreen berries

WINTERGREEN

Wintergreen, a small easily overlooked plant of eastern North American forests, has leaves and berries with a noticeably familiar flavor largely because the oil of wintergreen is used to flavor candy and chewing gum. The berries are a tasty nibble in the woods, and the leaves are brewed into a tea.

COMMON NAME: Wintergreen, Checkerberry

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Gaultheria procumbens*

PLANT FAMILY: Ericaceae (Heath family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Small, shiny, oval, evergreen leaves rising about a creeping woodland plant with white, downward-facing, bell-shaped flowers followed by small, red, aromatic berries

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: The berries in late summer and fall

LOOK-ALIKES: The distinctly minty flavor of the plant will separate it from any potential look-alike.

DISTRIBUTION: Eastern North America, but other species can be found in western North America, South America, eastern Asia, New Zealand, and Australia

USES: As a nibble, brewed as a tea

NOTE ON METHODS: Collect berries by hand. Use scissors for leaves; don't pull up plants.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Various catalogue companies sell the dried leaves and berries.

Ostrich fern fiddleheads, the furled . . .

and unfurling stages

FIDDLEHEAD FERN

While not a harbinger of spring, fiddlehead ferns are one of the glories of spring growth. It's always amazing watching their fronds rise up and unfurl like some kind of leafy green prehistoric creature. In some countries, such as Japan, there are fern festivals. In the spring, ferns garner a good price in upscale food stores; they also appear on the seasonal menus of some high-end restaurants.

COMMON NAME: Ostrich Fern Fiddlehead

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Matteuccia struthiopteris*

PLANT FAMILY: Onocleaceae (Ostrich Fern family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Ostrich fern has a crownlike growth, and it produces two kinds of structures. One is a tall, green, leafy frond, and the other is a brown stalk with short side branches that produce the spores.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: Look for fully expanded ostrich ferns when mature and return the following late April or early May to gather the tops.

LOOK-ALIKES: Other ferns have "fiddleheads" or crosiers, too, when they first unfurl, and not all are palatable, so it's important to know the field description features of this particular fern.

DISTRIBUTION: Northern parts of the Northern Hemisphere

USES: Still furled tops (crosiers) well cooked as a potherb; eat in moderation

NOTES ON METHODS: Collect the tops only, and only when they're still furled (curled); cook well.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Often available in season in farmers markets and upscale food stores

Cattails in winter

CATTAILS

While some wild plants offer only one edible part at only one time of the year, cattail is a full-service, year-round food store that never closes. Since cattails are found nearly worldwide, there's likely to be a cattail swamp not far from where you're reading this book. Starting with the young shoots, one can eat one's fill, then make a tasty bread from the yellow flower and, if there's a will to do it, make a passable starchy food from the massive interconnected rootstock.

COMMON NAME: Cattail

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Typha latifolia*

PLANT FAMILY: Typhaceae (Cattail family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Cattail is best known by its habitat in water and its tall, overwintering stalks that bear a cylindrical brown structure filled with downlike seeds. In late spring, however, there's a short, powdery yellow cone above this that contains the pollen and is readily dispersed.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: Shoots in spring; male flower in late spring, early summer when still bright yellow and powdery

LOOK-ALIKES: Reeds (*Phragmites), bulrushes (Scirpus*) and sedges (*Cyperus*) grow in the same wetland habitat, so it's important to know the cattail's easily recognizable features.

Cattail shoots and flower tops

DISTRIBUTION: Cosmopolitan, primarily Northern Hemisphere, but also Australia and New Zealand

USES: Flowers used as flour for bread, young shoots for salad, roots for flour

NOTES ON METHODS: Young shoots are easily cut with a knife. (Use only the succulent central strand.) When the top flower (male) is a bright yellow spike, knock or rub it off into a plastic bag. Dig up and process rhizomes (rootlike parts) for flour (arduous).

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Not seen

YELLOW IS THE COLOR OF . . .

I found a stand of cattail one summer, which is easy to do once you know to look for the brown "tails" sticking up out of marshy places. If you want to gather it for food, though, you need to be there in the spring for the new shoots, and in early summer for the yellow flower cones. You could gather the roots anytime, of course, but that's more than a labor of love; that's hard work for little to show. I returned and got the shoots in the spring, and after peeling the outer layers, it did have a kind of heart-of-palm core that made a nice salad. What I wanted was the yellow flower tops to make a cattail bread. I watched it develop, until finally one day I took a subway out to the park at the edge of town and walked over to the cattail stand. I could wade into the marsh, of course, but I just wanted what I could reach on dry ground. I bent the cattail stalks over and inserted the yellow tops into a large plastic bag and smacked the stalk. Yellow pollen fell off the stalk into the bag. I helped it along by pulling it free from the stalk. I kept at this until I had nearly filled the bag. By that time, I was covered in yellow pollen from head to foot. It wouldn't just brush off, so I walked back to the subway for the ride home. Nobody on that subway had ever seen anyone covered in yellow powder before, so they gave me a wide berth. No one sat within a stone's throw of me, fearing, I suppose, fear itself. I must have appeared quite contagious. I got home with my bag of cattail pollen and pursued my goal of making cattail bread.

Wild garlic bulbs and fruiting tops

Wild leeks (ramps) leaves and bulbs

ALLIUMS (WILD GARLIC AND WILD LEEKS)

However distinct world cuisines are, one seasoning they all have in common is the allium. *Allium* is the genus of all onions, chives, scallions, garlics, shallots, and leeks. There are more than five hundred species worldwide, and while no grocery store worth its name ever runs low, farmers' markets and Asian markets are usually piled high with a wide variety of them. Just from learning about how Europeans, Indians, Chinese, Japanese, and Moroccans use these alliums, one can acquire a formidable culinary education.

Wild alliums are piled higher in your neighborhood parks than cultivated ones are in local markets. One of the most sought-after, especially in the restaurant trade, is an eastern North American plant called the ramp or wild leek (which is not a wild form of cultivated leeks). Another, the common grasslike "onion" known as wild garlic, is a native European and Asian "weed" that is now an invasive weed in North America. Both ramps and wild garlic are eminently usable and can substitute for any of the cultivated alliums you usually use.

Wild garlic greens in winter

WILD GARLIC

Often appearing with the first cool days of autumn, wild garlic becomes conspicuous once all the grasses around it die back and leave it a sole overwinter survivor. Even under snow, the leaves persist, so that during a midwinter thaw, the green leaves will show above the surrounding snow. These are mild flavored and easily collected and used. The bulbs, though available once the ground allows for digging, are not often collected because of the work involved in cleaning and preparing them for use. By midspring, when the leaves become rank and no longer mild flavored, the bulbs become large and fleshy, and can be gathered then to make French onion soup. In early summer, when the plants send up flower stalks, the fruiting heads can be collected by pulling them off. You get a handful of tiny garlic bulblets, and just a few plants give you more than enough to season a salad or a cooked dish.

COMMON NAME: Field Garlic, Wild Garlic, Wild Onion

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Allium vineale*

PLANT FAMILY: Amaryllidaceae

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Grasslike leaves, 6–12 inches (15–30 centimeters) high, that are hollow, dying back in late spring as a flower stalk develops; the flower appearing at the top of the stalk, followed by a small head of small bulblets; the plant growing from a bulb, often tiny and massed during the winter, larger and single in late spring; all parts smelling (and tasting) strongly of garlic when handled

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: Grasslike leaves during winter and early spring, and again in early fall; the flowering tops in early summer

LOOK-ALIKES: Grass has flat leaves, not hollow ones; ornamental bulbs (e.g., those of tulips or daffodils) lack any discernible garlicky odor.

DISTRIBUTION: Northern Hemisphere, nearly everywhere

USES: Young shoots in salads, the bulbs in soups, and the fruiting heads crushed as garlic

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Not readily available because so many alliums are already being sold

Wild leek (ramps) leaves and bulbs

RAMPS OR WILD LEEKS

Ramps are a species of *Allium*, and they are often referred to as wild leeks, although the leek is a different allium. Ramps have also become the darling new food of upscale restaurants, where elaborate, pricy ramp dinners can put enormous pressure on the numbers of a normally abundant wild food. Areas where ramps were once collected for personal use are now being harvested commercially. It's even illegal to harvest more than a personal-use amount of ramps in some regions, and many others are looking into restricting wild-crafting practices that threaten the sustainability of the native flora.

COMMON NAME: Ramps, Wild Leeks

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Allium tricoccum*

PLANT FAMILY: Amaryllidaceae (Amaryllis family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Two or three soft, light-green leaves, 6–12 inches (15–30 centimeters) long, with parallel veins and soft to the touch, rising up out of a bulb; the whole smelling strongly of onion when bruised or tasted; with a terminal flower that doesn't develop until after the leaves have yellowed and died back

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: Soft, flat leaves, smelling of onion when rubbed, in April and early May

LOOK-ALIKES: Lily of the valley (*Convallaria majalis*) has a similar pair of leaves, that lack any onionlike odor, and they rise from an underground stem (rhizome), not from a bulb. The flowers appear along a stem (raceme), while the leaves are green—unlike in ramps, in which there is a terminal flower after the leaves die. There is no onion odor to any part of lily of the valley. Because lily of the valley is poisonous, it requires some attention to detail to avoid picking this plant by mistake.

DISTRIBUTION: Eastern and central North America, but other similar species occur throughout the north temperate zones, across North America, Europe, and Asia.

USES: Cooked greens; pickled bulbs

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Ramps are sold in farmers' markets and in some upscale food stores. They are now a seasonal specialty in some high-end restaurants.

Skunk cabbage showing flower holder and young unfurling leaves

SKUNK CABBAGE

If there's one edible wild plant that does not have to be sampled, but that cries out for attention, it's the skunk cabbage. Its large, green basal leaves make it look like a garden plant growing in wild swampy ground. Like other arums, all parts of the plant are filled with calcium oxalate crystals that, if chewed, cause an instant inflammation in the mouth. What would drive someone to want to experience that, or find a way to tame this plant's wildness? Maybe just the challenge of overcoming such an obstacle.

COMMON NAME: Eastern Skunk Cabbage

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Symplocarpus foetidus*

PLANT FAMILY: Araceae (Arum family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Skunk cabbage first appears in late fall or early winter as a hard conelike structure often rising out of swampy ground. A reddish flower holder (spathe) appears over the winter, beside which the green leaves, still furled in a cone, emerge, opening as large cabbagelike leaves.

GETTING THE SKUNK OUT OF THIS CABBAGE

Making a stuffed skunk cabbage dish for twenty-five was a foolhardy thing to try to do, but once you start something there's a dynamic that keeps you going. I had gathered many "heads" of completely furled skunk cabbage leaves. I pulled them apart, washed them thoroughly, and boiled them in several changes of water, each boiling for about five minutes. Then, I drained the leaves and spread them out to fill them with a mixture of already cooked wild rice, plus raisins and toasted pine nuts. I closed up the now stuffed skunk cabbage leaves and placed them in a large casserole dish with a tomato-based broth, which I heated in the oven for twenty minutes.

The result was . . . well, some people took seconds, and that was all I wanted to see.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: Early spring before the leaves unfurl

LOOK-ALIKES: False hellebore (*Veratrum viride*) grows in the same habitat. It has leaves that have parallel veins, unlike skunk cabbage, which has leaves with distinct midrib and side veins. The difference is crucial because false hellebore is poisonous; people have confused the two.

DISTRIBUTION: Northeastern North America; different species occur in western North America and eastern Asia

USES: The furled leaves cooked as a cabbage

NOTES ON METHODS: The young, still-furled cones of leaves have to boiled in several changes of water.

Sweet flag rhizomes and young shoots

Sweet flag flower

SWEET FLAG

Churches in English farm country line their floors with sweet flag so that the farmers coming to church in their work boots walk on it, thereby releasing an aromatic air freshener that puts everyone in the right spirit for a religious occasion. That its rhizome makes a great spice cake makes sweet flag all the sweeter.

COMMON NAME: Sweet Flag

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Acorus calamus*

PLANT FAMILY: Araceae (Arum family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Looking like a typical iris, with swordlike leaves instead of an iris flower, sweet flag develops a small, 3-inch (7.62-centimeter) or so petalless yellow flower stalk projecting from the side of one of the leaves.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: Spring, when the spikelike yellow flower appears midway up the swordlike stalk, when it cannot be confused with an iris

LOOK-ALIKES: Irises resemble sweet flag. Dig up sweet flag to see the rhizome and smell the spicy aroma of plant.

DISTRIBUTION: Throughout most of Northern Hemisphere, also Australia

USES: Rhizome grated as a spice

NOTES ON METHODS: Rhizome is dug up, cleaned, and grated into a coarse, flaky substance to be mixed with flour in making spice cake.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Not seen

Daylily tubers

Daylily flower and flower buds

DAYLILY

There are lilies and daylilies, two somewhat similar but totally unrelated plants. Daylilies have become a hot item in ornamental plantings, with over fifty thousand different kinds having been developed. Daylilies are a regular seasonal menu item in parts of Asia, and where they occur they soon find culinary favor.

COMMON NAME: Daylily

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Hemerocallis fulva*

PLANT FAMILY: Xanthorrhoeaceae (Daylily family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Green shoots in early spring rising above a cluster of brown tubers; tall, green swordlike leaves produce terminal flower buds and orange flowers appearing in late spring/early summer, each flower lasting a day

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: The emerging shoots in early spring and the flowers in early summer

LOOK-ALIKES: Dig up tubers in early spring to make certain of your identification, or wait until the flower buds and flowers appear in late spring/early summer.

DISTRIBUTION: Daylilies are native to East Asia, but can be found throughout most of North America and elsewhere as ornamentals or weedy wildflowers.

USES: Young shoots as a potherb; buds cooked in mixed dishes; tubers cooked as potatoes

NOTES ON METHODS: Emerging greens are easily gathered; buds can be removed in June as they appear; tubers are gathered in early spring while still hard.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Sold as flower buds in farmers' markets, also packaged in Chinese markets

Watercress in flower

Watercress in spring covering brook surface

WATERCRESS

Watercress is in most markets, nearly year-round, as little bundles of shoots bound together by a rubber band. Seeing these, it's hard to imagine it as a common plant in slowly moving streams. It can even be found growing wild in big cities. Seeing it grow, lengthen, flower, and fruit is to see its life cycle spread out before you, beyond the truncated clump of greens sold at market. Watercress is a joy to behold, as well as one of the tastiest salad greens.

COMMON NAME: Watercress

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Nasturtium officinale*

PLANT FAMILY: Brassicaceae (Mustard family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: The same as market watercress, except that it becomes rangy as it grows, and it produces tiny, white, four-petaled flowers, followed by needle-shaped seed pods.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: Spring, when the leaves become conspicuous in moving streams

LOOK-ALIKES: This looks just like market watercress: compound, smooth-edged, rounded leaflets. But nothing resembles watercress in this habitat.

DISTRIBUTION: Throughout North America, Europe, Central Asia

USES: Young leaves in salads

NOTE ON METHODS: Collect young leaves with scissors.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Sold in markets

Garlic mustard at collectible stage

GARLIC MUSTARD

Often looking like violet leaves before it puts up its springtime flower stalk, garlic mustard is one of those plants that knows its place where it's native, but knows no bounds where it's introduced by people, whether they've introduced it intentionally or inadvertently. In the United Kingdom, it's written about as an honorable weed; in the United States it's now referred to as an alien invasive. It also happens to be a delicious nibble, a fine addition to salads, and a tasty pesto for a spring pasta.

COMMON NAME: Garlic Mustard (United States), Jack-by-the-Hedge (United Kingdom)

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Alliaria petiolata*

PLANT FAMILY: Brassicaceae (Mustard family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Roundish, toothed, violetlike basal leaves in late fall and winter, then a flower stalk with triangular, toothed leaves and four-petaled white flowers, followed by needle-shaped seed pods

A WEED UNLIKE ANY OTHER

How could such an innocuous weed become such a threat to forest trees? It was hard to believe. It happens that garlic mustard is a common roadside weed in North America, as it is in Europe. It is a heliophile, a sun lover, as most weeds are. But, for reasons still unclear, in North America, its roots interfere with the roots of adjacent trees, so that the trees cannot get the nutrients they need from the soil, and they die. Once the trees are dead and their leaves no longer shade the ground beneath them, garlic mustard moves past them into the woods to attack the nearest living trees, so to continue their migration into otherwise shady woodland.

Garlic mustard was introduced as a culinary herb in the United States from Europe in the late 1800s. That it is an invasive weed here but not there is explained, in part, by the fact that in Europe there are plant-eating insects that keep it in check; there are no such insects in the United States. Because it can grow in partial shade, it can occupy sites along woodland paths that other weeds that need unrestricted sunlight cannot. Individual plants can produce up to 1,000 seeds per year, and these are viable in the soil for about five years. On average, garlic mustard can spread 20 feet (about 6 meters) a year, and sometimes as much as 100 feet (30.5 meters), making it incredibly difficult to control. Because it releases a toxin that kills soil fungi, and in particular those that help trees acquire needed nutrients, it is not just a pesky weed, but a diabolical destroyer of trees growing on the edges of wooded areas, moving into those areas once the trees and their canopy of leaves are dead.

Garlic mustard in flower

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: Late fall, when basal leaves first appear and anytime during winter and early spring before the flower stalk rises

LOOK-ALIKES: Violets look similar but are tasteless compared to the pungent, somewhat bitter, garlic mustard leaves.

DISTRIBUTION: Throughout northern North America, Europe, northwestern Africa, western Asia

USES: Young greens in salads, as potherbs, as pesto, or as a sauce

NOTES ON METHODS: Collect young basal leaves (those at the base of the plant), not the leaves on the flower stalk, which are too bitter.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Sold as spring greens in farmers' markets

Wintercress leaves

WINTERCRESS

Wintercress is the endless line of a flowering yellow mustard you see along the roadways in May. It comes up much earlier, but it doesn't get noticed until it flowers. Some people are so partial to its somewhat bitter, pungent flavor that it has even been canned commercially, and it can be purchased, sometimes called yellow rocket, at farmers' markets in spring.

COMMON NAME: Wintercress, Yellow Rocket

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Barbarea vulgaris*

PLANT FAMILY: Brassicaceae (Mustard family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Leaves look like watercress, except that wintercress grows on dry ground, usually in waste areas, and produces sprays of bright yellow, four-petaled flowers in late spring

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: Common weed in waste grounds, along paths, with compound, smooth-edged, rounded leaflets and brilliant sprays of yellow, four-petaled flowers in spring

LOOK-ALIKES: Looks like watercress on dry ground

DISTRIBUTION: Throughout North America and Europe

USES: In salads and as a potherb

NOTES ON METHODS: Collect leaves in early spring.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Sold locally as greens or canned

Peppergrass leaves

PEPPERGRASS

Peppergrass is one of the most abundant wild mustard plants of late spring and summer. It becomes quite weedy, growing wherever it can get a foothold. The leaves are delightfully pungent, so much so that it can be nibbled raw, put in sandwiches, or added to salads without overwhelming the salad mix.

COMMON NAME: Peppergrass

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Lepidium virginicum*

PLANT FAMILY: Brassicaceae (Mustard family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Basal leaves look somewhat like shepherd's purse or even dandelion in their lobing, but the stalk soon appears showing smaller, toothed stalk leaves, and tiny, four-petaled white flowers and circular seed containers.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: In late spring and summer, a common weed along paths

LOOK-ALIKES: Other species of *Lepidium*; note shape of fruit and pleasing peppery taste of alternate, toothed leaves, which differentiates this peppergrass species

DISTRIBUTION: Throughout North America, Canada south through Central America; elsewhere introduced

USES: Young plants in salads

NOTES ON METHODS: Collect leaves as needed because peppergrass is available over a long season.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Not seen

Shepherd's purse in flower and fruit

SHEPHERD'S PURSE

People around the world celebrate the coming of spring with whatever springs up and strikes their fancy. In Asia, shepherd's purse is a ubiquitous early-spring green, as it is in Western Europe and North America, but it's there that it's incorporated into springtime festivals.

COMMON NAME: Shepherd's Purse

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Capsella bursa-pastoris*

PLANT FAMILY: Brassicaceae (Mustard family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Dandelionlike basal leaves in early spring, except that the lobes point up rather than down, and the stalk produces tiny, white, four-petaled flowers and somewhat triangular (purse-like) fruit pods containing the seeds.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: One of the first greens to appear along park paths in early spring

LOOK-ALIKES: Only basal leaves (the first that emerge out of the ground) look remarkably like little dandelion leaves except the lobes point up rather than down

DISTRIBUTION: Throughout the Northern Hemisphere

USES: Young leaves in salads; as a potherb

NOTES ON METHODS: Collect leaves in early spring.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Not seen

Sea rocket

SEA ROCKET

A beach walk along shore can turn up a characteristic number of seaside plants. One of these is sea rocket, a mustard of such pungency that less is almost too much in a salad.

COMMON NAME: Searocket

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Cakile edentula*

PLANT FAMILY: Brassicaceae (Mustard family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Leathery, toothed, alternate leaves on a rangy stalk with four-petaled, pale-purple flowers, growing along coastal beaches

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: The alternate, toothed, somewhat leathery leaves of a straggly plant along beaches in summer

LOOK-ALIKES: No look-alikes exist along beaches, given its sharp, peppery taste and four-petaled flowers.

A SEASONING IS NOT A SALAD

It was during a predinner walk along a beach that I found more searocket than I had ever seen before. I gathered a bagful and brought it back to make a salad for dinner. I had enough for a salad for eight people. I washed the searocket carefully, cut it into bite-size bits, added some chopped tomatoes, a little lettuce, some oil and vinegar, and served it with dinner. I had only nibbled it before, never thinking that a nibble and a mouthful could be such different things. Nobody who took a forkful of my salad could swallow it. I was shocked to realize that I had made something totally unpalatable from a very pungent green that is perfectly edible when used in scant amounts. From then on, when I visit that beach house with those friends, I am asked if I'm going to make that memorable salad again. It was unforgettable.

DISTRIBUTION: A coastal plant, along the east and west coasts of North America; other similar species in Europe and Asia

USES: Leaves in salads

NOTES ON METHODS: Collect leaves remembering less is more.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Not seen

Horseradish leaf showing toothed leaf marginv

WILD HORSERADISH

Horseradish is one garden plant that has to be watched so that it doesn't take over, and despite its usefulness as a condiment, it can become a curse. Finding a single plant or several along a stream in a woody area of a city park is cause for joy. Horseradish is sold as a root in grocery stores, but more people probably know it as a bottled condiment to be added as a pungent flavor to blander foods. Unlike root vegetables, horseradish is not a cooked-root food, such as parsnips, so when gathering it in the wild, you just need a smidgeon. Wasabi is a different but related Mustard family plant used in Japanese sushi platters, to be eaten in small bits, not mouthfuls.

COMMON NAME: Wild Horseradish

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Armoracia rusticana*

PLANT FAMILY: Brassicaceae (Mustard family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: The basal leaves resemble broad dock leaves in that they're large ovals, except wild horseradish leaves are dentate (have rounded teeth) along their edges. The flower stalk rises producing small, white, four-petaled flowers.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: Early summer, when leafy and the clearly dentate toothed leaves can be seen

LOOK-ALIKES: Docks (large, leafy species of *Rumex*) have similar leaves, but their edges are not toothed.

DISTRIBUTION: Throughout most of North America, southeastern Europe, western Asia

USES: A condiment, the root grated in moderation

NOTE ON METHODS: Use a shovel to dig up the root.

NO MAN IS A PROPHET IN HIS OWN HOUSE

When Euell Gibbons was a regular on the *Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson, I joined James Trager, who went to interview him for a story he was writing. We went out collecting a variety of wild edibles, including horseradish. He brought it back to the house and proceeded to turn it into a sauce. He chopped the roots into small pieces and used a juicer that was sitting on the kitchen counter. At some point his wife walked in, and you'd think Euell had just killed someone. Apparently, the juicer was *her* juicer for the things she wanted to juice, and she said the horseradish had just ruined her juicer; it could never be cleaned of that odor. No matter how famous you are in the world at large, at home you're just someone always getting in someone else's way.

Dandelion in flower

DANDELION

Dandelion is one of the first noticeable greens of spring. Suddenly, its leaves are everywhere, and then its yellow flowers cover lawns like a planted crop, followed by its seedy "blowballs." Lawn maintenance is largely about controlling dandelions. They're everywhere and, while they have a specific season (spring), they sometimes come up and flower in late summer and fall. That this quintessential unwanted weed is also an agricultural crop, something that people grow and sell at market, makes it a fascinating subject of cultural history.

COMMON NAME: Dandelion

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Taraxacum officinale*

PLANT FAMILY: Asteraceae (Aster family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Basal leaves are lobed and showing teeth; the flower stalk is leafless and unbranched, and produces a yellow flower on top that becomes a rounded blowball of seeds.

JUST HOW BITTER IS TOO BITTER?

If there's one well-known plant that's the touchstone for bitterness, it's dandelion. Dandelion is a bitter green, even when it's young, and it only gets more so once the plant flowers. It's not that bitter melon isn't more bitter, it's that people who eat bitter melon choose to eat it for its bitterness. Dandelion, for many of those even willing to eat it, is wanted as a bitterless bitter green. People who seek out bitter greens can find dandelion greens in several varieties at farmers' markets.

So if you're not looking for a bitter green and you toss dandelion greens into your salad, or even cook it, you're not likely to repeat the meal and will probably tell anyone willing to listen how bitter it is. Maybe it's the belief that bitterness means something is unsafe to eat or to be taken only as medicine that gives people this bias. Whatever it is, it's a ubiquitous green that is not likely to find a home among a population brought up on sweets.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: In early spring for the first greens, in early April or soon afterward for the flowers

LOOK-ALIKES: Dandelion can be distinguished in flower by its leafless flower stalk.

DISTRIBUTION: Cosmopolitan

USES: Greens as a potherb; flowers for wine; roots for a coffeelike beverage

NOTE ON METHODS: A dandelion root extractor will uproot the most intransigent dandelion; leaves can be gathered by hand, with scissors.

Chicory flower

Chicory leaves

CHICORY

Chicory is a pretty blue roadside wildflower, and people who admire it but would never consider picking it to eat already do if they eat the leafy red radicchio, Italian dandelion (puntarella), or Belgian endive. It's a bitter green that is popular in Europe but is still shied away from in many regions in the United States.

COMMON NAME: Chicory

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Cichorium intybus*

PLANT FAMILY: Asteraceae (Aster family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Chicory is recognized by its summer-appearing 2-foot-long (0.6-meter-long) flower stalk, festooned with conspicuous circular flowers sporting blue, petallike parts.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: Chicory comes up in the spring, but it's often only when it opens its showy blue flowers in early summer that you notice chicory along roadsides.

LOOK-ALIKES: Dandelion before it flowers is probably the closest look-alike to chicory. It's hard to tell dandelion from chicory based only on its basal leaves, but usually only dandelion has short, tooth-like projections on its leaves. Chicory's flower stalk has leaves on it and the plant produces beautiful blue flowers in early summer.

DISTRIBUTION: Throughout Northern Hemisphere and Australia

USES: Basal leaves are gathered as a cooked green.

NOTE ON METHODS: Collect leaves by hand using scissors.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Sold in various forms in farmers' markets and groceries

Burdock roots and leaves

Burdock in flower

BURDOCK

Gobo is the name for the long slender burdock roots sold in Asian markets and, now, upscale food stores and farmers' markets. Cultivated burdock root is a traditional part of Japanese cuisine, and it's a shock to people who have eaten it to be shown just how common it is as a large, rangy path-side weed.

COMMON NAME: Burdock

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Arctium minus*

PLANT FAMILY: Asteraceae (Aster family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Basal leaves appear in early spring. They are broad, oval-shaped, and distinctly gray-white and hairy beneath. The flower stalks rise up in early summer and produce burs that are dispersed by attaching themselves to whoever or whatever brushes against them. Burdock is a biennial plant, producing only basal leaves the first year and the flower stalk the next.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: Look for the leaves along the sides of paths where burdock can be ubiquitous during spring and summer.

LOOK-ALIKES: When young, docks (some species of *Rumex*) resemble young burdock leaves, but burdock leaves are quite hairy/wooly and whitish below, whereas the dock leaves are green below.

DISTRIBUTION: Cosmopolitan

USES: Roots are cooked in Asian cuisine; the flower stalks, peeled and boiled, make a passable cooked vegetable, if not too bitter.

NOTE ON METHODS: Using a shovel, unearth the large burdock root before the flower stalk appears in its second year. Scrape clean and boil. (This is serious work.)

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Sold as a root in farmers' markets and some upscale food stores, and Asian markets

Pineapple weed in flower

Gathering pineapple weed

PINEAPPLE WEED

Often, when walking along paths, one can step on an easily overlooked little weed growing along the side. An odor strongly reminiscent of pineapple fills the air and you look around for someone eating it or having recently discarded it. But it's the little weed, the pineapple weed, that is so strongly redolent of pineapple. It looks like chamomile, except a chamomile that is lacking all its white flowers that circle the yellow disk flowers; there are only the conelike yellow disks. Farmers' markets routinely sell fresh pineapple weed labeled as chamomile, despite the difference in appearance and odor. No one seems to mind.

COMMON NAME: Pineapple Weed

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Matricaria matricarioides*

PLANT FAMILY: Asteraceae (Aster family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Pineapple weed is a low-growing, poor-soil weed barely 8 inches (20 centimeters) high, with finely cut leaves, small flowers that look like yellow cups without surrounding petals, and an odor of pineapple when bruised.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: In spring and summer, when the little plants are flowering and relatively easy to recognize by appearance or odor

LOOK-ALIKES: Chamomile is a look-alike for the pineapple weed, but it differs in its outer circle of white flowers and its odor.

DISTRIBUTION: Cosmopolitan

USES: Leaves and flower tops used as a tea

NOTE ON METHODS: Collect by hand using scissors rather than pulling up the plants and contending with the dirty roots.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Sold fresh in farmers' markets, usually marketed as chamomile

Jerusalem artichoke in flower

Jerusalem artichoke tubers

JERUSALEM ARTICHOKE

It's not from Jerusalem, and it's not an artichoke; it's a kind of sunflower, but whatever it's called, it has fleshy edible roots that are sold in grocery stores as "sunchokes."

COMMON NAME: Jerusalem Artichoke

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Helianthus tuberosus*

PLANT FAMILY: Asteraceae (Aster family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: This is a tall plant—over 6 feet (1.8 meters)—with rough, bristly stems and mostly opposite, broad, toothed, rough leaves; flowers that resemble sunflowers but are smaller and numerous on the plant; and a root system with several swollen, fleshy, tuberlike parts.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: In early fall, when the plant is still in flower; look for elongated, tuberlike reddish roots (which differ from the more round, grayer sunchokes in markets)

LOOK-ALIKES: These plants look like sunflowers, but have many small flowers rather than singular large ones. The fleshy, tuberlike roots can be dug up to confirm identification.

DISTRIBUTION: Eastern North America from Canada to Florida, west to Texas; native to North America but cultivated across the North Temperate zone

USES: The tuberous roots in salads, almost with the texture of water chestnuts

NOTE ON METHODS: Use a spade to dig up the tuberous roots; wash them clean, remove the outer skin with a radish peeler, and serve raw.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Sold in farmers' markets and groceries, usually called sunchokes

Sow thistle in flower

SOW THISTLE

Sow thistle is an ancient potherb still in use today. It occurs as a path-side weed, looking much like a dandelion but with toothed leaves clasping the flower stalk. Breaking it releases a flow of a milklike juice. It got its name from the belief that lactating sows would increase their milk flow if fed sow thistles.

COMMON NAME: Sow Thistle

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Sonchus oleraceus*

PLANT FAMILY: Asteraceae (Aster family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Dandelionlike lower leaves, but has stalk leaves, and these clasp the flower stalk, on top of which are produced yellow dandelionlike flowers; when broken, the plant exudes a white, milklike fluid

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: In late spring, when the shoots first appear, and into summer as it flowers

LOOK-ALIKES: Other sow thistles are similar, but they either have prickly edged leaves or very spiny leaves, whereas this one has smooth leaves. All are edible, but the sow thistle described here is easier to work with and eat.

DISTRIBUTION: Worldwide in temperate zones

USES: Greens as a potherb

NOTE ON METHODS: Collect by hand.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Not seen

Spearmint in flower

SPEARMINT

In the spring, you smell spearmint before you see it, the scent likely released as you step on it walking across a grassy area. When you look down, it doesn't seem like much, but it packs an intense, minty aroma. Along parkland paths, it can be found in tall stands, flowering in early to midsummer, and the leaves can be gathered and used in any way you enjoy the spearmint flavor.

COMMON NAME: Spearmint

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Mentha spicata*

PLANT FAMILY: Lamiaceae (Mint family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Leaves are opposite, simple, toothed, and sessile on the square flower stalk; the small clustered, pinkish-purple flowers are at the tops of the branches. The plant is strongly scented.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: The very young plants are underfoot in the spring, when you smell their presence if you step on it. The 2-foot (0.6-meter) summer stalks have opposite, simple, toothed leaves attached snugly to the stem, and a 3-inch (7.6-centimeter) terminal, fingerlike set of small lilac or pinkish flowers.

LOOK-ALIKES: Other minty mints also have square stems and opposite leaves, but differ by leaf attachment to the stalk or position of flowers on the flower stalk.

DISTRIBUTION: Europe, southwest Asia, much of temperate North America

USES: As a nibble, in salads, in drinks, in ice cream, etc.

NOTE ON METHODS: Collect by hand.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Sold in farmers' markets

GARDEN MINT OR GARDEN MENACE?

When is a mint too much of a good thing? We love our mints. We devour mint candy and mint ice cream, eat bulgar wheat salads made with mint, and drink endless cups of mint tea. Mint makes us feel good, but ask a gardener what the consensus is about mint in the garden. You have to be very careful of the mint you choose to plant in your garden. Some kinds of mint are so aggressive that to go away on a short vacation is to come home to a monocrop—just mint. Mint is not for timid gardeners, but it is a delightful edible, and most of us who garden keep mint contained in pots.

Catnip in early spring

Catnip showing its opposite, toothed-leaf arrangement on the stem

CATNIP

Catnip is not a controlled substance for cats, but perhaps it should be. Their behavior under its influence is anything but predictable. That it doesn't affect us the same way allows it to be one of the most common roadside weeds in the Northern Hemisphere. It's a common spring green sold in farmers' markets, usually called "catmint." Like spearmint and other minty mints, catnip can be used as a tea, although the hairiness of its leaves reduces its usefulness in salads or as seasoning.

COMMON NAME: Catnip, Catmint

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Nepeta cataria*

PLANT FAMILY: Lamiaceae (Mint family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: A woolly, compact plant with opposite, simple, toothed leaves on a square stalk and whitish to purplish clustered terminal flowers; strongly scented

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: In early spring, when the leaves are lush, before it flowers

LOOK-ALIKES: Other minty mints also have square stems and opposite leaves, but none are so conspicuously hairy

DISTRIBUTION: Widely distributed across the Northern Hemisphere

USES: As a tea

NOTE ON METHODS: Collect leaves by hand.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Sold in farmers' markets

Wild bergamot flowers

WILD BERGAMOT

Bergamot is the name of an orange whose rind is used in making Earl Grey tea. The red flowering bergamot has an aroma thought to be similar to the bergamot orange. It's also known as Oswego tea, for the tea its leaves make, as are the leaves of the purple flowering wild bergamot.

COMMON NAME: Wild Bergamot

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Monarda fistulosa*

PLANT FAMILY: Lamiaceae (Mint family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: A square stalk with opposite, toothed leaves, and a terminal powder puff–like flower cluster with tubular pale lilac flowers.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN TO LOOK: In summer, when the plant is in flower

LOOK-ALIKES: Bergamot or bee balm (*Monarda didyma*) has red flowers but is otherwise similar

DISTRIBUTION: Throughout and native to North America

USES: Leaves as a tea

NOTE ON METHODS: Collect leaves by hand.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Not seen

Left and right: two species of Mountain mint

MOUNTAIN MINT

Despite its common name, mountain mint occurs as a wild plant at sea level, and some species are now commonly used as ornamentals in butterfly gardens. Its strong minty odor and taste makes it popular as an edible, especially for making tea.

COMMON NAME: Mountain Mint

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Pycnanthemum spp.*

PLANT FAMILY: Lamiaceae (Mint family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Square stalk with opposite, narrow, tapering, smooth-edged leaves (but some species are broader leaved and somewhat toothed), and somewhat flat-topped, terminal clusters of small white flowers; strongly scented

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: In summer, when the plants are in flower and fruit

LOOK-ALIKES: The opposite leaves, square stem, and strong minty odor when rubbed makes it hard to mistake for any nonmint.

DISTRIBUTION: North America; native to North America

USES: As a tea, in salads, in ice cream

NOTE ON METHODS: Collect by hand the leaves and fruit tops.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Not seen

Henbit dead nettle growing between tiles

Red dead nettle, an attractive weed

DEAD NETTLES

Henbit dead nettle is one of the first wildflowers of spring, appearing on lawn edges and along the sides of paths. Other dead nettles occur at about the same time and place. Although they are mints, they are not minty in flavor. Still, some people like to steam and season them as a spring green.

COMMON NAME: Henbit

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Lamium amplexicaule*

PLANT FAMILY: Lamiaceae (Mint family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Square stem with opposite leaves, the upper ones rounded, toothed, and clasping the stalk, and small purplish flowers at the nodes; not minty

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: In early spring, when the flowers appear

LOOK-ALIKES: Dead nettles are various species of *Lamium* that grow in the same grassy, weedy places and can be used the same way.

DISTRIBUTION: Europe, northern Africa, western Asia, throughout North America

USES: Spring green (potherb)

NOTE ON METHODS: Collect with scissors.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Not seen

Stinging nettle

STINGING NETTLE

People who know about stinging nettle know it's something to avoid: Touching it causes an instant irritation, sometimes a short-lived but unbearable itching. Yet spring festivals are held every year to celebrate this plant. It is one of the first green plants to appear after winter, and it has long been known to be good for you, both nutritionally as a food and cosmetically for your skin. Taming it only requires gloves to collect it and a little hot water to inactivate its stinging hairs. And it's not just another herby plant that's edible; it's really tasty and well worth the bother to collect it.

COMMON NAME: Stinging Nettle

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Urtica dioica*

PLANT FAMILY: Urticaceae (Nettle family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Leaves are opposite and toothed, and every part of this plant is amply equipped with tiny hairs that sting on contact.

WHO GETS STUNG

I was once running a mushroom and wild plant tour in Turkey. At a roadside rest stop along the Black Sea, we found two women making stinging-nettle rolls. They had a huge tub of stinging nettles, which they pulled out by the handful and spread over a large circular piece of dough, which was then baked, sliced, and sold. The rolls were very good—just nettle greens and dough, no seasoning. What struck me, though, was that they weren't wearing gloves. They just stuck an arm deep into the container and pulled out the nettle greens. Wondering if it really was stinging nettle, I asked if I could take a leaf. Given permission, I drove my arm into the container. What a mistake! I was instantly and massively attacked by the stinging hairs of the plant. Yes, this was stinging nettle, but why were the women able to touch it without any problem? This remains a mystery.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: In early spring in wet woods, near streams; once it flowers, with clusters of inconspicuous flowers in the nodes (where the leaves are), it's past the choice eating stage

LOOK-ALIKES: Its stinging hairs are unmistakable.

DISTRIBUTION: Europe, northern Africa, western Asia, and North America

USES: In soups, as a pesto, in sauces, as a custard.

NOTES ON METHODS: Use gloves and scissors to collect. Immerse in boiling water and prepare in any number of creative ways.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Farmers' markets

Amaranth

A farmers' market amaranth species called either "kalaloo" or "callallo"

AMARANTH

Pigweed is not a name that would likely entice you to want to eat a plant, but whatever its name—and it has several common names—this is a longstanding, popular edible around the world. In farmers' markets, it is likely to be labeled callaloo or kalaloo. There are species in cultivation and wild species of amaranth, and it's nearly cosmopolitan and ubiquitous in its distribution. As an edible weed, it's one you can find throughout the entire growing season, and it's probably growing along the sidewalk you amble on or in any park you walk through. So maybe it's time to give it another, more attractive name. Wild spinach is what it might be most like, but that name is used for too many different plants and calling it that would only cause confusion.

COMMON NAME: Amaranth, Pigweed, Callaloo, Kalaloo

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Amaranthus spp.*

PLANT FAMILY: Amaranthaceae (Amaranth family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: A ubiquitous herbaceous weed usually a foot (30.5 centimeters) or so high, with alternate, simple, oval, smooth-edged leaves and a spikelike, fuzzy green flowering top

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: The young basal leaves in the spring, reappearing in midfall, and the leaves with the flower stalk bearing a fuzzy spike of flowers summer and fall

LOOK-ALIKES: A remarkably undistinguished weed when first seen, but the spikelike green flowers atop the oval, alternate, toothed leaves help separate it from other plants

DISTRIBUTION: Nearly cosmopolitan

USES: As a potherb, seeds as a grain (different species are cultivated and wild harvested for the seeds, which are used as a cereal, a gluten-free meal, and even made into a confection)

NOTES ON METHODS: Collect by hand, using scissors.

Lamb's quarters

Lamb's quarters

LAMB'S QUARTERS

Wild spinach is how it's known in farmers' markets and on restaurant menus. Just about anything called spinach will appeal to more people than whatever common name a plant has had—except to those who hate spinach, of course. Lamb's quarters, known as fat hen in the United Kingdom, is esteemed as a weed that's got more food value in it than whatever else is growing in your garden. Some church dinners occasionally contain a "wild spinach" side dish, without anyone being the wiser. Upscale restaurants can charge a premium for a side dish of one of the most common weeds in the world.

COMMON NAME: Lamb's Quarters, Wild Spinach, Fat Hen, Goosefoot, Pigweed

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Chenopodium album*

PLANT FAMILY: Amaranthaceae (Amaranth family)

FIELD DESCRIPTIONS: Herbaceous weeds with alternate, triangular leaves, the top cluster with a graying center; unwettable (water runs off the plant rather than soaking through it)

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: Young plants appear in midspring and can be found well into the fall; the weed occurs along path sides and sidewalks.

LOOK-ALIKES: The grayish color in the center of the top leaves makes it recognizable.

DISTRIBUTION: Nearly cosmopolitan

USES: A potherb substitute for spinach

NOTES ON METHODS: Collect by hand using scissors rather than uprooting the plants.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Sold at farmers' markets

Glasswort (seabeans)

Glasswort (seabeans)

GLASSWORT

Along coastal shores, there's a leafless, jointed succulent growing right at the water's edge. It gets inundated by high tide and thrives in this environment. Lately, it has come into specialty food stores and upscale restaurants labeled as sea beans. It's a succulent, salty condiment of sorts, of which, like potato chips, it is impossible to eat just one.

COMMON NAME: Glasswort, Samphire, Sea Beans, Pickleweed

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Salicornia spp.*

PLANT FAMILY: Amaranthaceae (Amaranth family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Clumped, jointed, branched, succulent, salty-tasting plants, looking leafless, growing in the tidal zone or just above it along shores; turning red in the fall

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: In late spring and summer, when the plants are green and succulent

LOOK-ALIKES: No look-alikes exist for a jointed, slender, succulent growing along the seashore.

DISTRIBUTION: North America and Europe; also South Asia

USES: As a condiment, pickle, salt substitute

NOTE ON METHODS: Use scissors to snip the uppermost succulent part of the plants. Don't pull them up by their roots.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Sold in upscale food stores as sea beans

Japanese knotweed at collectible stage for eating

JAPANESE KNOTWEED

There's a story that the landscape architect Frederick Law Olmstead, looking for a quick-growing ground cover, introduced Japanese knotweed into the planting mix for New York City's Central Park. It didn't take long for it to cover the ground, soon becoming a menace threatening valuable park plantings, such as rhododendrons. Even cutting it down doesn't stop its growth, which is primarily by horizontal underground roots. This introduced Asian weed didn't take long to become part of the Northern Hemisphere's urban weed flora. Fortunately, it's edible. Not only are the very young (up to a foot [30.5 centimeters] high) shoots a tasty, tart, asparaguslike substitute, but the tops of the quickly growing plants are used in making beverages, such as a bottle ale (knotweed ale) coming out of the United Kingdom. Even the roots have become useful, as they contain resveratrol, a compound that, in tests, has been reported to double the lives of laboratory mice. Resveratrol is now available online, despite peer-reviewed articles debating its efficacy for humans.

COMMON NAME: Japanese Knotweed, Japanese Bamboo

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Fallopia japonica*

PLANT FAMILY: Polygonaceae (Knotweed family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Emerging shoots look like asparagus spears, but soon triangular leaves appear, and the plant rises quickly into a very tall, weedy bamboo-appearing thicket. The leaves are alternate, smooth edged, and triangular with a squared-off base.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: In early spring, just as the asparaguslike shoots rise up out of the ground; later in the year, it's easier to locate Japanese knotweed because it's such a conspicuously tall component of the landscape, but the purpose of finding it would be to return to the site the following early spring (April) to harvest the emerging spears.

DISTRIBUTION: Originally eastern Asia, but now common as an invasive in parts of North America and Europe

USES: As an asparagus substitute, a rhubarb-like substitute as a compote with strawberries, a beverage

NOTE ON METHODS: Collect by hand, using scissors or a knife to cut the young Japanese knotweed spears when they are up to about a foot (30.5 centimeters) high.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Knotweed is sold in an ale in the United Kingdom.

Broad-leaved dock

Curly Dock

CURLY DOCK

Before it's even thought of as an edible, curly dock has had a traditional use as a way to relieve the itching caused by touching stinging nettle. The almost jell-like substance at the top of the root is rubbed on the site of the "sting," and the itching subsides. Dock is also an important herbal used, for example, to remove heavy metals from the body. But it is also a ubiquitous weed, and a good edible when young.

COMMON NAME: Curly Dock, Yellow Dock, Sour Dock

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Rumex crispus*

PLANT FAMILY: Polygonaceae (Knotweed family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Curly dock has long, narrow basal, smooth-edged leaves that appear curled along their edge. The flower stalks rise in late spring and have alternate, simple, narrow leaves, topped by a spike of massed but tiny, greenish flowers, followed by brownish, papery fruits.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: The long, narrow, curly-edged leaves in the early spring before the flower stalk appears, and the leaves become too coarse to eat, and in the fall when fresh leaves reappear.

LOOK-ALIKES: Broad-leaved dock is similar, but has very wide leaves, more closely resembling burdock leaves.

DISTRIBUTION: Throughout temperate North America, also New Zealand and Australia

USES: As a potherb (greens cooked like spinach)

NOTE ON METHODS: Collect leaves by hand.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: The root, called yellow dock, is sold in health food stores and herbalist shops.

Sheep sorrel

SHEEP SORREL

Garden sorrel is a pretty common plant that some people grow. It is sold at farmers' markets, and can even be found in bottled soup products (schav) in some grocery stores. Sheep sorrel is a wild relative that is considered a noxious weed because of the way it spreads, but it's also a tangy-tasting one that is a nice nibble on a walk, and a good lemony addition to salads.

COMMON NAME: Sheep Sorrel

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Rumex acetosella*

PLANT FAMILY: Polygonaceae (Knotweed family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Small, fragile plants with long-oval leaves with two little, earlike lobes at their bases; flowering in late spring with reddish stalks of clusters of petalless individual flowers; leaves have a distinctly lemony taste

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: Spring, as the plant becomes conspicuous, and all summer where it can be found in shady places

A PLANT THAT CAN DISSOLVE FISH BONES

My wife and I were making dinner with friends of ours, a Japanese couple who were eager to try this experiment with us. Reading that sheep sorrel leaves contained various acids, we wondered if it would dissolve the tiny bones in a popular springtime north-eastern North American fish called shad. We stuffed the shad with sheep sorrel leaves and baked it very slowly in an oven for over two hours. It seemed to work because the fish was delicious and no bones appeared to be in it!

LOOK-ALIKES: Woody nightshade (*Solanum dulcamarum*) is a woody vine with a purple flower and red berries, but the leaves are similar—that is, oval leaves with little earlike lobes at their leaf base, but have no lemony taste.

DISTRIBUTION: Widely distributed across the Northern Hemisphere

USES: As a nibble and in salads, soups, stuffing

NOTE ON METHODS: Collect by hand, preferably using scissors to cut leaves and plant tips.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Garden sorrel (*Rumex acetosa*) is sold fresh in farmers' markets and in jars of soup, called schav, in supermarkets.

Wood sorrel in flower

WOOD SORREL

Wood sorrel is a small, cloverlike weed in almost every garden and along every street and pathside in the Northern Hemisphere. Unless it is in its conspicuous yellow flower, it's easy to overlook. As an edible, it makes a nice addition to a salad or can be made into a tangy, lemony beverage. It contains oxalic acid, which is not something to consume on a regular basis, but no harm comes from an occasional salad, soup, or beverage of wood-sorrel leaves.

COMMON NAME: Wood Sorrel

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Oxalis spp.*

PLANT FAMILY: Oxalidaceae (Wood Sorrel family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: A small, low-growing weed with heart-shaped leaves somewhat resembling clover; flowers have five petals, some are yellow, others pink, and some white depending on the species

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: In lawns from spring well into fall, the plant is in flower much of the year.

LOOK-ALIKES: The leaves resemble clover leaves except that wood sorrel leaves are indented at their tips, making them appear heart shaped.

DISTRIBUTION: Common in Europe and Asia and parts of North America as a common weed

USES: As a nibble, in salads, as a sour soup, and as a lemony beverage

NOTE ON METHODS: Collect by hand, using scissors rather than pulling out the plants.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Not seen

Purslane

PURSLANE

Henry David Thoreau wrote about eating purslane, which he called pussley. With his recommendation, why not try it? Today, it has become popular enough to show up in farmers' markets, and to be asked for there when not seen. Why anyone would want to buy purslane when it's free for the taking is probably a more complicated question than it seems. Farmers claim what they're selling is better than the wild stuff, and cleaner. Maybe, maybe not. What purslane is is a delightful green succulent that can be added to salads or cooked as a potherb. It has a nice flavor and, as a succulent, a pleasing texture.

COMMON NAME: Purslane, Pussley

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Portulaca oleracea*

PLANT FAMILY: Portulacaceae (Purslane family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Sprawling, low-lying weed with alternate branching; clusters of small, oval, paddle-shaped fleshy leaves; small, five-petaled yellow flowers; and stems appearing succulent, straggly, and distinctly reddish.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: In flower boxes, gardens, along sidewalks, in parks—wherever it can get a foothold—from spring into fall until the frost

LOOK-ALIKES: No look-alikes exist with leaves and stems like purslane.

DISTRIBUTION: Nearly worldwide

USES: In salads and soups, but more popular as a spinachlike potherb

NOTE ON METHODS: Collect by hand; both the succulent stems and leaves are edible.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: A popular succulent green sold at farmers' markets

Milkweed in bloom

Milkweed pods

MILKWEED

Milkweeds are most famous, perhaps, as the food for monarch butterflies during their annual migration from Mexico to Canada. They lay eggs on the common milkweed, *Asclepias syriaca*, and some others—eggs that will grow into caterpillars and not be eaten by hungry birds because they are too bitter. The milkweeds, when properly cooked, are a commonly consumed wild vegetable among knowing foragers. The best and safest part to cook and eat are the bud clusters that appear in early summer. Cooked and served with a seasoned butter sauce, they are equal to anything that comes out of the garden.

COMMON NAME: Milkweed

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Asclepias syriaca*

PLANT FAMILY: Asclepiaceae (Milkweed family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Unbranched stalks with opposite, broadly oval, smooth-edged leaves, with a sticky white latex wherever broken; with a greenish, broccolilike bud cluster, followed by pinkish boxy flowers and then soft-scaly, fat, short, green pods.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: The buds, which look like small bunches of broccoli, appear in late spring; the flowers follow, and they are architecturally unique in their construction. These are followed by fat, soft-prickly pods filled with a creamy center (soon replaced by a feathery mass of seeds).

LOOK-ALIKES: Common dogbanes (species of *Apocynum*) have opposite leaves and a milky sap when bruised, but they have branching stalks, unlike the unbranched milkweeds, and their flowers are different. Their pods, while similar, are very narrow, more like cigars than the swollen pods of milkweed. Other milkweed species differ in flower color or habitat; the common milkweed (*A. syriaca*) is a weed of dry areas.

DISTRIBUTION: A common New World plant genus, but becoming established in parts of Asia

USES: Shoots, buds, and pods all used as potherbs, though the buds are best

Pokeweed at collectible stage to cook and eat

Pokeweed in leaf, no longer safe for eating

POKEWEED

Why would anyone want to eat a poisonous plant? Why is pokeweed, as a cooked spring green, so popular in some regions that it has been sold as a canned product? Correct and adequate processing seems to be the difference between a delicious spring green and a bellyache or worse.

COMMON NAME: Pokeweed, Poke

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Phytolacca americana*

PLANT FAMILY: Phytolaccaceae (Pokeweed family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Perennial weeds sending up spring shoots that rise by late summer to over 6 feet (1.8 meters), bearing large leaves and a finger-like strand of white flowers followed by juicy purple berries; the old stalks turn rhubarb red in the fall

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: This is most easily recognized when in fruit or in fall when the stalks are bright red; collecting time, though, is in midspring.

LOOK-ALIKES: Nothing quite resembles the mottled green leaves of pokeweed, and its raceme of white flowers followed by purple berries is quite distinctive.

DISTRIBUTION: Predominantly in North and South America, East Asia, and New Zealand, but found many other places

USES: Young shoots as a potherb thoroughly cooked; recommended boiling several times, changing the water each time—the boiling removes the toxins, and multiple boilings remove any residues still present; eat in moderation

NOTE ON METHODS: Collect by hand, using a knife or scissors to cut the top greens, but not after the plant has risen above 15 inches (38 centimeters) or so.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: A popular cooked green in the southeastern United States; the canned product is not currently known to be available

Chickweed in flower

Chickweed

CHICKWEED

A low-growing, sprawling, weedy plant of early spring (and fall to winter), chickweed is popular enough a green that it shows up in farmers' markets. It's a delicate addition to a salad, and it makes a good cooked green. You don't know how ubiquitous this little weed is until you start looking for it. As invisible as it seems to be, it's a festival plant in Japan, when on January 7 chickweed is one of the seven plants included in the Nanakusa-no-sekku celebration. This annual winter event, symbolizing longevity and good health, involves eating green plants otherwise absent from the landscape at this time.

COMMON NAME: Chickweed

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Stellaria media*

PLANT FAMILY: Caryophyllaceae (Pink family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Sprawling, small, opposite-leaved weedy plants with simple, oval, smooth-edged, long-stalked leaves and five-petaled white flowers that appear to be ten-petaled because each is two-parted.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: In early spring in first leaf; good when still in flower. It disappears over the summer but reemerges in the fall as lushly as it first appeared in spring until it gets too cold.

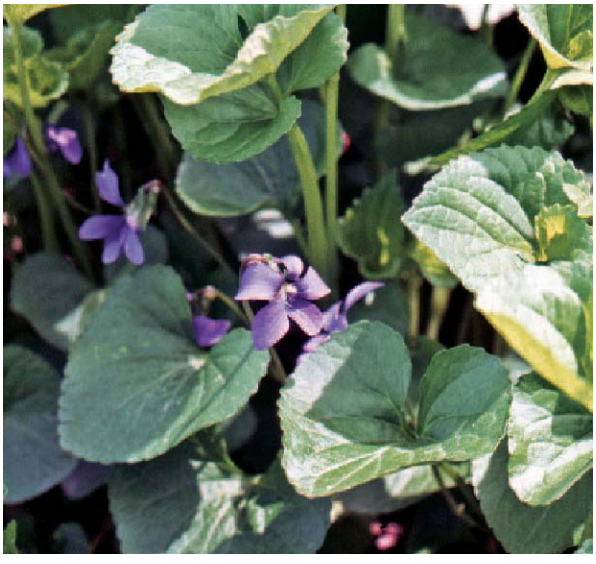
LOOK-ALIKES: No look-alikes exist for this distinctive low growing, common urban and suburban weed.

DISTRIBUTION: Common throughout most of the Northern Hemisphere

USES: Greens as salad or potherb

NOTE ON METHODS: Collect by hand, using scissors; there's no need to uproot the plant.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Sold at farmers' markets



Violets in flower

VIOLETS

Some plants are more decorative than tasty. Violets are common weeds in lawns and grassy areas, and these have blue flowers that people like to sprinkle on spring salads and over cooked dishes, purely for the visual delight of seeing them. There are fragrant species of violets that are used for making syrups, and one could make crystallized violets from any species, although it would be for the sugar, the sweet, rather than any violet fragrance or flavor. (There are many flowers that people like to eat, including such garden favorites as squash flowers and such wild ones as dandelion and bee balm.)

COMMON NAME: Violets, Pansies, Heartsease

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Viola spp.*

PLANT FAMILY: Violaceae (Violet family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Low-growing, basal, heart-shaped, toothed leaves with five-petaled blue to purple flowers

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: Spring, when violets are in flower in lawns and yards

LOOK-ALIKES: In flower, violets are distinctive, although the leaves alone can cause confusion.

DISTRIBUTION: Nearly worldwide

USES: Decorative addition to salads, potherb, some species fragrant and used in candy, syrup

NOTE ON METHODS: Collect by hand, carefully, and refrigerate as soon as possible.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Sold as a confection in markets

White clover in flower

CLOVERS

No weed is as prevalent in lawns as clover. There are several species, but the common white and red clovers seem to be everywhere. White and yellow flowering sweet clovers (species of *Melilotus*) are often what you smell just after a grassy area has been mowed. Clovers are rather tasteless edibles, but they are so prevalent and easily identified that they are worth the effort to snip some for a salad. The flowers of the white and red clovers, when chewed, should remind one of the taste of clover honey. Finding a four-leaf clover has always been thought of as a sign of good luck.

COMMON NAME: Clovers

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Trifolium spp.*

PLANT FAMILY: Fabaceae (Bean family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Ubiquitous herbaceous weeds with tiny leaves bearing three leaflets.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: First conspicuous three-parted leaves appear in early spring, soon followed by white or red flowers; the white clover is then ever-present until frost, while the red clover often fades out after flowering

Red clover in flower

LOOK-ALIKES: Wood sorrel has three leaflets, but its leaflets are heart shaped.

DISTRIBUTION: Cosmopolitan

USES: As an addition to salads; flowers as a jelly or tea

NOTE ON METHODS: Collect leaves and flower heads by hand.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Not seen in markets

MOST VALUABLE ADDITION TO A LAWN

What most people see as a blemish in an otherwise grass-only lawn, clovers are the natural source of fertilizer in these lawns. People pay for herbicides to rid their lawns of clover, and then pay for fertilizers to keep their lawns healthy. Clovers contain tiny nodules on their roots that house nitrogen-fixing soil bacteria, so, like other Bean family plants, they add nitrogen to the soil, thereby increasing the fertility of all that grows around them.

Hopniss tubers

HOPNISS

If you ever wondered if edible wild plants could sustain you if you chose to live on them, consider the American groundnut. It's a vine in the Bean family that bears an underground string of cherry tomato–to egg-size tubers that are a tasty substitute for potatoes, and there seems to be an endless amount of them. Now, how many there are and how many people could rely on them for sustenance—those are questions not so easily answered. But similar sustaining plants are available almost anywhere you go, whether it be a root vegetable in the Kalahari Desert, palm-tree pith in Papua New Guinea, or cassava (tapioca) in the Amazon.

COMMON NAME: Hopniss, American Groundnut, Indian Potato

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Apios americana*

PLANT FAMILY: Fabaceae (Bean family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Vines with alternate, compound, oval, smooth-edged leaflets (usually five to seven) and chocolate-colored pea flowers, followed by green pods. Digging up the vine reveals a tough, almost cordlike root with small to large brown-skinned, roundish tubers growing every few inches along its length.

Hopniss in flower

Hopniss in bean pod

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: In summer when the plant is in flower and fruit, but it can also be found during the winter by its twining, leafless vine growing up waterside plants, such as the common reed (Phragmites).

LOOK-ALIKES: No look-alikes exist for a chocolate-colored, pea-shaped flower on a vine with alternate, compound, smooth-edged leaflets and a green bean fruit.

DISTRIBUTION: Common throughout eastern and central North America, but only as far west as the Rocky Mountains; a unique native North American plant

USES: The tubers can be boiled as a potato substitute.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Not seen in markets

Beach pea in flower and bean pod

BEACH PEA

Peas and beans are as familiar to us as any food plants can be. We eat green beans, sugar snaps, lima beans, fava beans, even peanuts, and so on. But what about all those beanlike plants we see growing in our parks and nearby woods? Like nearly all plant families, the Bean family makes toxins to protect itself from predators. The ones we buy in the markets are cultivated and safe to eat, unless we're seriously allergic to one or more of them, as many people are to peanuts. Wild beans are common but, with a few exceptions, not consumed by people. The beach pea is one of those exceptions. It's easily identified and its bean pods, when young and tender, are a popular cooked edible.

COMMON NAME: Beach Pea

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Lathyrus japonicus*

PLANT FAMILY: Fabaceae (Bean family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Beach-inhabiting, sprawling herbaceous plants with alternate, compound, oval, smooth-edged leaves and pinkish pealike flowers followed by green pods

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: Early summer when the plants are in conspicuous flower

LOOK-ALIKES: Given its beach location, there are no look-alikes for this described Bean family plant.

DISTRIBUTION: Throughout most of northern North America and down the Pacific coast; native to North America

USES: As a substitute for green beans

NOTE ON METHODS: Collect the young pods by hand. Cooked pods are edible when young; when tough, shell the pods for the "peas."

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Not seen in markets

Bayberry in fruit

Bayberry in fruit

BAYBERRY

Bayberry is a common shrub of northeastern North American seashores. Its leaves are used to season food, and its waxy berries to make candles. A related species, sweet gale or bog myrtle (Myrica gale) occurs throughout northern North America and northern and western Europe. Its aromatic leaves are used in flavoring soups, stews, and drinks.

COMMON NAME: Bayberry, "All-American Fever Treatment"

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Myrica pennsylvanica*

PLANT FAMILY: Myricaceae (Gale family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Small shrubs with alternate, oval leaves somewhat toothed at their apex and extremely aromatic on rubbing; the plants are not usually noticed until they are in fruit, with their dense clusters of tiny, grayish, waxy berries. This is a seashore plant.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: When the shrubs have clusters of tiny blue berries, growing along the seashore, it's easy to spot, anytime from summer to early winter, or until the leaves fall.

LOOK-ALIKES: No look-alikes exist; if in doubt, rub and smell the leaves: Bayberry leaves are aromatic.

DISTRIBUTION: The genus is nearly worldwide in its distribution; bayberry is restricted to northeastern North America.

USES: As seasoning in place of bay leaves; making candles

NOTE ON METHODS: Collect the leaves by hand.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Bayberry candles are available in catalogs and online

Silver linden in flower

LINDEN

Unter den Linden is a boulevard in Berlin. It's also a German expression that is about walking under linden trees when they're in flower. The flowers are so fragrant that it almost makes you weak to smell them, and trees planted one after another along a street is something to behold. There are many different kinds of linden trees (which are called lime trees in the United Kingdom), all of which flower during June, often in a sequence, and each for about a week.

COMMON NAME: Linden, Basswood, Lime Trees

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Tilia spp.*

PLANT FAMILY: Malvaceae (Mallow family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Trees with alternate, simple, heart-shaped, toothed leaves and a willow leaflike bract from which a stalk and a cluster of fragrant yellow flowers appears

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: The flower clusters, which are attached to 3-inch (7.6-centimeter) boat-shaped, leaflike flower holders, should be gathered on a dry day.

LOOK-ALIKES: The heart-shaped leaves have look-alikes, but once the flower buds and flowers form, there are no look-alikes for linden.

DISTRIBUTION: Northern Hemisphere; many ornamentals are planted in cities

Linden tree in flower

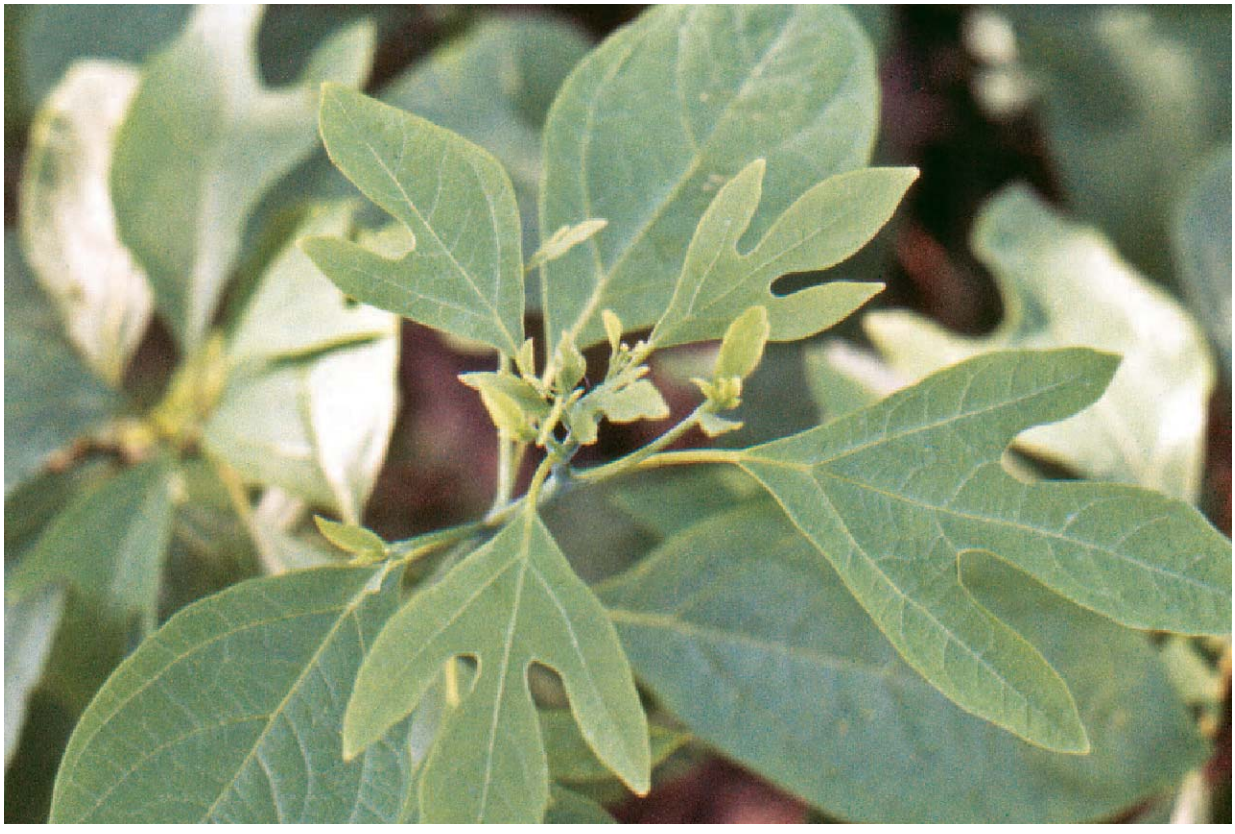
USES: Linden is used primarily as tea. Basswood honey is an American linden honey that is especially tasty and a nice addition to a cup of linden tea.

NOTE ON METHODS: Flowers can be collected on dry days and dried thoroughly before storing.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Packaged linden tea and jars of basswood honey (American linden) are sold in stores that sell teas and honeys.

DOZING OFF

When linden is in flower, you can't walk down a street where it's planted or through a park without smelling its sweet perfume. Actually, there are more than a half dozen different kinds of linden trees cities used as ornamentals. Basswood is just one species. Specialty stores sell basswood honey and linden tea. The tea is usually the dried flowers of the European linden. I can always tell the day in early June when breezes blow the fragrance of the flowering lindens down streets and across parks. I gather a couple of flowering branches to bring home to put in a vase. I thought if I liked the smell so much outdoors, I'd love it at home on the table. I was working one day with the flower vase about 2 feet (0.6 meters) from my nose. It was hard to concentrate on reading or writing; I was distracted by the scent of the flowers, even feeling groggy. It wasn't long before I fell asleep. I attributed this to my being tired from the night before. But it happened again a few days later—with a new sprig of linden flowers on the table. I tested it and found that no matter how alert I was, sitting in front of a vase of linden flowers put me to sleep, a very pleasing restful sleep. Do the flowers have that power? If so, why isn't everyone with sleeping problems putting linden flowers in their bedrooms? At least during their blooming period, you should enjoy restful nights.



Sassafras showing all three kinds of leaf shapes

SASSAFRAS

Until recently, sassafras was the flavoring of choice for most oral medications. When it was discovered that its active ingredient, safrole, was carcinogenic in lab animals, it was removed from the list of acceptable compounds used in making medicines. Still, filé, a powdered sassafras leaf, is found in shakers on tables in Cajun restaurants and is available as a spice sold in jars in many markets. There is even a form of sassafras, now on the market that is safrole-free. Sassafras makes a delightful boiled root tea, usually sweetened to taste.

COMMON NAME: Sassafras

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Sassafras albidum*

PLANT FAMILY: Lauraceae (Laurel family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Trees with alternate, smooth-edged leaves that come in three distinctive shapes: a long oval, a mitten shape with what looks like a thumb and hand, and a three-lobed leaf, all usually on the same tree. The twigs, when chewed, have a characteristic fragrant aroma and flavor.

Sassafras root and leaves

"ECSTASY" IN THE WOODS?

Four teenagers were sitting around a campfire in the woods, drinking sassafras tea they made themselves. As my wife and I approached them, one got up, experiencing difficulty standing, and told us that he and his friends were feeling odd. He said they felt almost unable to move, and were "spacey." They had been drinking one cup after another and, without knowing it, they had overdosed on sassafras tea. It contains a compound very similar to the street drug known as ecstasy. No harm came to them, and they seemed very relaxed, hardly anxious about their condition. Fortunately, no grizzly bears were in the neighborhood.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: When in its distinctive leaf from midspring to midfall, the tree is unmistakable. In winter, leafless stems are conspicuously green, and scratching one releases its characteristic spicy aroma.

LOOK-ALIKES: With its three different and distinct leaf types with smooth leaf margins, and its spicy aroma when twigs are broken or chewed, nothing resembles it.

DISTRIBUTION: Eastern North America and eastern Asia

USES: Tea, sauce on foods, powdered thickener in gumbo dishes in Cajun restaurants.

NOTE ON METHODS: Leaves can be gathered when green, then dried and powdered; roots should be dug up from small saplings that are growing on a hillside so it's easier than having to lift them vertically out of the ground. The root is cleaned and boiled until the water turns a rusty brown.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Sold on the Internet; available in Creole restaurants

Wakame being blanched and hung to dry in Kamakura, Japan

SEAWEEDS

There are over fifty different seaweeds used as food by people on this planet. Most are familiar to people in Japan, an island country where seaweeds can be found abundantly about its shoreline. Anyone who has eaten sushi has eaten nori, a red seaweed used as a wrapper around the little rice cakes. Hijiki is a spiky, branched brown seaweed common in stores with takeout salad bars. Dulse, a red seaweed, when dried is a popular salty nibble, a substitute for potato chips, that is put out in bars in Nova Scotia. Irish moss is another red seaweed and a source of carrageenan, a compound used as a gel in many foods, for example, to keep ice creams from separating. Several green seaweeds that pile up on beaches around the world, species of *Enteromorpha* and *Ulva*, are dried and powdered in Japan and sold in markets as a food seasoning called anoriko. Seaweeds, depending on the species, are used in salads, soups, pickles, teas, desserts, and as gels. About a dozen different kinds of packaged dried seaweeds are now available in health food stores. Several other kinds can be found in Asian markets. Walking along an ocean beach, you can usually find a couple of different seaweeds any month of the year. Perhaps what is most surprising to many in the West is that seaweed is so much a part of life in the East. Instead of birthday cake, a birthday in Korea is celebrated with a seaweed soup. In fact, it is a soup made with wakame, the same seaweed that is a customary ingredient in Japanese restaurant miso soup.

Sea lettuce washed up along a beach

SEA LETTUCE

COMMON NAME: Sea Lettuce

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Ulva lactuca*

PLANT GROUP: Chlorophyta (Green Algae family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: This green seaweed can look like pieces of lettuce from someone's sandwich. Sometimes it forms thick mats or covers long stretches of beach near the water's edge.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: Spring to fall along ocean beaches

LOOK-ALIKES: Nothing resembles sea lettuce except abandoned pieces of lettuce

DISTRIBUTION: Worldwide

USES: Salads, soups, powdered as a seasoning

NOTE ON METHODS: Easily gathered on beaches; wash thoroughly before using

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Packaged in health food stores; also found in catalogs

Wakame hanging to dry in Kamakura, Japan

WAKAME

COMMON NAME: Wakame (Japanese), Miyok (Korean)

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Undaria pinnatifida*

PLANT GROUP: Phaeophyta (Brown Algae)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: a brownish seaweed about 3 feet (1 meter) long by 1 foot (30 centimeters) across with a firm, prominent center vein and many broad, soft, lateral blades

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: a brown seaweed with a central vein; spring and summer

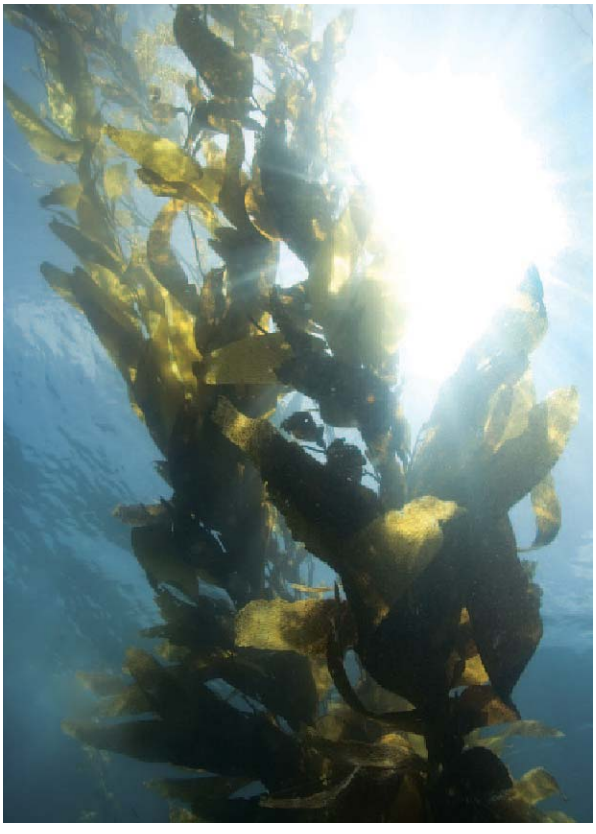
LOOK-ALIKES: no look-alikes given this description.

DISTRIBUTION: native to East Asia but now found in waters off the coast of New Zealand and Australia, parts of Europe, Argentina, and in California's San Francisco Bay

USES: in miso soup; in salads; dried as a snack

NOTE ON METHODS: once collected, this seaweed can be washed and hung out to dry; when boiled this brown seaweed turns a bright green

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: sold dried in health food stores and Asian markets



Giant kelp

Dried giant kelp

GIANT KELP

COMMON NAME: Giant Kelp

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Macrocystis pyrifera*

PLANT GROUP: Phaeophyta (Brown Algae)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: rising to 100 feet (30 meters) or more from a root-like holdfast attached to the ocean floor; the leaf-like parts with a central strand to which are attached small flotation bulbs and long, broad, toothed leaf-like blades.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: the tops form a canopy along surface of Pacific Ocean just off shore; most conspicuous in fall.

LOOK-ALIKES: bull-kelp has large, hard, bulb-like flotation structures.

DISTRIBUTION: southeastern Alaska to Baja, California, and along the coast of southern South America

USES: dried and pulverized for use as a salt substitute; scissored and used in soups and stews.

NOTE ON METHODS: giant kelp can be gathered by knife by cutting the surface blades off the main stalk, or just gathering loose floating pieces; then drying the seaweed before using it

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: sold in many kelp products; one of kelps used in making a vegetarian "kelp caviar"

Cheeses (common mallow) in flower and fruit

Cheeses (common mallow)

MALLOW

Every kid knows marshmallows, and there's even a plant called marshmallow, but it's not the pillowy white, sugary confection kids love to blacken over campfires. Still, there are many mallows that are eaten. Korean markets, for example, offer fresh mallow leaves in the spring and fall. Put into soups, these offer a pleasing taste and texture. Wild mallow leaves offer much the same. Cheeses, the common wild mallow of urban and suburban areas across the Northern Hemisphere, is just one of dozens of small, weedy plants that line our sidewalks, lawn margins, and park path sides. Many of these, like the ubiquitous plantains, are just too tough to chew, even cooked (though plantains can be juiced and used as a medicinal). Cheeses, though, is an edible wild plant that cooking makes more eatable, especially in texture.

COMMON NAME: Common Mallow, Cheeses

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Malva neglecta*

PLANT FAMILY: Malvaceae (Mallow family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Low-growing, roundish, toothed leaves with five-petaled white to pale lavender flowers followed by small flat, round, greenish fruits that look like tiny Gouda cheeses.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: Spring and fall, when the leaves are green and fresh

LOOK-ALIKES: The rounded leaves are distinctive, as are the tiny fruits.

DISTRIBUTION: China, western Asia, the Middle East, North Africa, Europe, and North America

USES: In soups, preferably cooked rather than raw; the fruits as a nibble

NOTE ON METHODS: Collect by hand, using scissors rather than uprooting plants.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: Cultivated species sold in Korean markets

Orache

Orache

ORACHE

Even if you've never heard of this plant before, it's possible that you've been eating it in a mixed salad if you've ever had mesclun, or the mixed greens sold in groceries. This mixture can contain a variety of little mustard greens, dandelionlike greens, and the reddish leaves of a garden-grown orache. It's a full-bodied green that is somewhat beetlike and salty in flavor. The genus *Atriplex* grows along beaches as well as in deserts. It's a water-retaining, salt-rich green that thrives in arid zones, including seashores. The wild orache of the northern coastal shores is a tasty cooked green, easily identified and prepared.

COMMON NAME: Orache, Saltbush

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Atriplex patula*

PLANT FAMILY: Amaranthaceae (Amaranth family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: Small seaside weed with triangular leaves, the basal tips pointing outward and the leaves somewhat leathery; the flowers greenish spikes in the leaf axils

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: Spring and summer, when the leaves are green and appear fresh

LOOK-ALIKES: The distinctive shape of the leaf separates it from anything else along a shoreline.

DISTRIBUTION: Global around the northernmost part of the planet

USES: In salads, as a potherb

NOTE ON METHODS: Collect by hand, using scissors; there's no need to uproot the plant.

COMMERCIAL AVAILABILITY: In bins of mixed salad greens in some markets

Arrowhead in flower

Arrowhead tubers

ARROWHEAD

Sometimes when people leave home they take their favorite food plants with them to grow wherever they move. Sometimes, when they move abroad, they find the same or a very similar plant already growing there, and gather and cultivate it for their continued enjoyment. Such is the case of the arrowhead. Arrowhead, also known as duck potato, grows throughout the Americas, and Native Americans have historically used the potatolike underground parts. The Chinese use a different species, which they cultivate and which the Japanese import. When Chinese people came to the United States and discovered a local species growing in California, they took to the duck potato like a duck to water. These are sold in Chinese markets as "Tsee goo."

COMMON NAME: Arrowhead, Duck Potato, Wapato

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Sagittaria spp.*

PLANT FAMILY: Alismataceae (Water Plantain family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: A small, 1- to 2-foot (30- to 60-centimeter) plant of pond margins, with arrowhead-shaped leaves that have distinct parallel veins and clusters of showy three-petaled white flowers. The fleshy corm at the base of the plant is from an inch across to the size of a hen's egg.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: Most easily recognized when in its clusters of showy, three-petaled white flowers, throughout summer.

LOOK-ALIKES: Arrow-arum (Peltandra) has similarly shaped leaves, but they have a midrib and side veins rather than parallel veins; the root is a taproot, not a fleshy potatolike corm.

DISTRIBUTION: One species or another throughout the Americas; widely distributed across northern Europe and in much of Asia

USES: The fleshy, bulbous underground corm, cooked as a potato substitute

NOTE ON METHODS: The potatolike parts grow in the mud of pond margins. Clean, then boil.

Poison oak

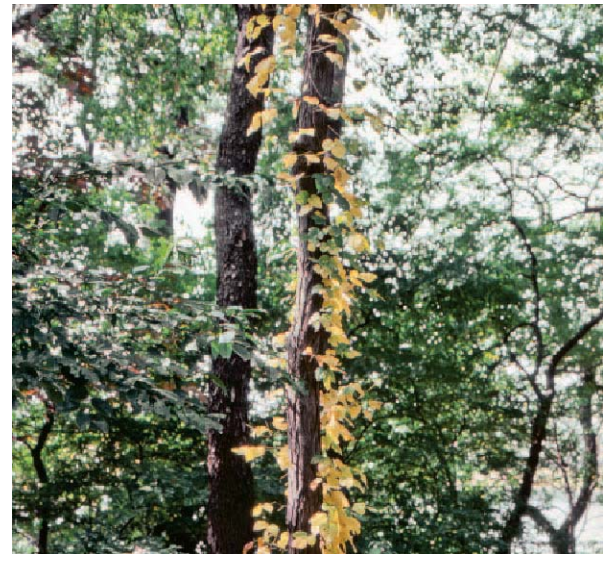
THE POISON IVY GROUP

Poison ivy and its even more poisonous relatives, poison oak and poison sumac, terrorize the urban and suburban landscape like nothing else. One or another of these plants occurs just about everywhere in the Northern Hemisphere, and at least one has been introduced into New Zealand and Australia, as poison ivy has been into Europe because its fall colors are so pretty. Poison sumac has been known to be collected by people making and selling fall leaf arrangements. In Japan, a common Asian species known as the lacquer tree is used to make the glossy black finish known as lacquerware, which is thought to be safe once it hardens. (The production of a lacquered toilet seat, however, had to be discontinued when people started complaining of a rash on their bottoms.)

Symptoms: Touching any of these plants can sensitize you so that a subsequent contact with any can produce a rash ranging from redness and itching to blisters that exude fluid and can last more than a month.

Treatment: There are numerous lotions that you can apply to your skin before going into an area where you think you are likely to encounter poison ivy, oak, or sumac. Washing your clothes and shoes as soon as you come home is equally important to prevent symptoms. There are also lotions for treating the itching that comes with the rash. Nobody dies from poison ivy, oak, or sumac; you just feel like that would be a better fate than the endless itching. So try to avoid coming in contact with any of these plants!

Poison ivy in fruit



Pioson ivy leaves in fall color

POISON IVY

COMMON NAME: Poison Ivy

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Toxicodendron radicans*

PLANT FAMILY: Anacardiaceae (Cashew family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: A woody climbing (sometimes creeping) vine with three leaflets that are oval and pointed, sometimes lobed or toothed, with the terminal leaflet attached to the others by a one-inch-or-longer (2.5-centimeter-or-longer) stem. There are summer clusters of greenish-yellowish flowers, and these are followed by clusters of green berries that become white.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: The sayings "Leaves of three, let it be," "Longer middle stem, stay away from them," and "Hairy vine, no friend of mine" are ways people remember what to look out for and avoid. The first poison ivy leaves to appear in the spring are shiny and reddish. The mature leaves can be large, and the vines climb up trees, often looking like the leaves of the tree. The fall leaves become a bright yellow. The hairy vines are often as dense as braided hair and many times can be seen growing up the sides of trees in urban and suburban parks and woods. They are very common.

DISTRIBUTION: Eastern North America, Canada south to Florida and west to Texas; also introduced in the United Kingdom and Europe; a very similar species occurs throughout much of temperate Asia

POISON OAK

COMMON NAME: Poison Oak

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Toxicodendron diversilobum*

PLANT FAMILY: Anacardiaceae (Cashew family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: A woody shrub, sometimes densely woody and thick-trunked in open sunny areas and sometimes a climbing vine, typically with three leaflets that are usually lobed and toothed, with clusters of whitish flowers followed by off-white berries.

POP-CULTURE POISON IVY

How many plants make it to the top of the charts in a Rolling Stones song? Poison Ivy is also a well-known character in the Batman series, a beautiful, young woman who is a trained-botanist-turned-super-villain when a beautiful but rare plant is going to be cleared to make room for a new development in Gotham City.

Poison sumac leaves in fall color

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: Leaves, when they first appear in spring, are bronze, then green in summer and yellow to bright red or pink in fall. The plant is deciduous, so the open woods along the Pacific Coast can be dense with the leafless woody stems of poison oak, a time when it is most difficult to recognize and avoid this plant.

DISTRIBUTION: Very common along the West Coast of North America, from British Columbia down through California; a similar shrub, *T. pubescens,* occurs in southeastern North America, from Virginia to Florida and west to Texas

POISON SUMAC

COMMON NAME: Poison Sumac

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Toxicodendron vernix*

PLANT FAMILY: Anacardiaceae (Cashew family)

FIELD DESCRIPTION: A tall shrub or small tree growing in wet, swampy areas, with alternate, compound, smooth-edged leaves and clusters of tiny greenish flowers followed by white berries.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHEN: Most distinctive when in colorful fall leaf, and only grows in very wet areas

DISTRIBUTION: Eastern North America from Canada south to Florida, west to Texas

Black raspberry pie

Cattail pollen bread

Cream of sheep sorrel soup

Black raspberries

Cattails in winter

Sheep sorrel

CHAPTER 4

RECIPES FOR YOUR FORAGED FOOD

Wild foods are not mysterious dishes from outer space or the underworld that you need special equipment to prepare. They are just foods. Period. Some can be eaten raw, and some are even best this way. Others have to be cooked to be safe to eat or digestible. But think about it: the same applies to the familiar foods you buy in the market.

Any standard cookbook has recipes for all kinds of plant parts—greens, flowers, fruits, and roots. With a few exceptions, wild foods can be substituted for the foods specified in cookbooks. If one searches online for information about the edible plants of the world, however, it's likely that some culture somewhere is using something related to what you're interested in eating. Sumac cones, for example, have a Middle Eastern equivalent food called zaatar.

Like cultivated plants, some wild plants have edible roots or bulbs, but not others, and not at all times of the year. Similarly, there are a number of wild plants that have flowers that are commonly used, as well as fruits and shoots.

When you think about incorporating or substituting wild foods in a dish, think of the plant foods you already know. Greens are well known ingredients in salads and as cooked vegetables. Fruits, of course, need no explanation. Roots and flowers are not nearly as well known or widely used. But in this book alone, you've already been introduced to several edible wild roots and flowers:

Edible Wild Root Foods

- Burdock (root—boiled vegetable), page 124
- Chicory and Dandelion (roots—beverage), pages 123 and 122
- Daylily (tubers—potatolike vegetable), page 113
- Wild Garlic and Wild Leek (bulbs—soup, pickle), page 108
- Hopniss (tuberlike roots—potato-like vegetable), page 148
- Jerusalem Artichoke (roots—crispy water chestnut–like salad crunch), page 126
- Sassafras (roots—aromatic beverage), page 154
- Sweet Flag (rhizome—seasoning), page 112
- Wild Horseradish (root—seasoning), page 121

Flowers

- Catnip, page 129
- Cattail, page 106
- Chicory, page 123
- Clover, page 146
- Dandelion, page 122
- Elderberries, page 90
- Linden, page 152
- Milkweed, page 142
- Pineapple Weed, page 125
- Roses, page 65
- Violets, page 145

These are variously used to make butter, fritters, honey, jelly, pickles, tea, vinegar, and wine, or put into salads or sautéed or crystallized.

Here are fourteen ways of using the edible wild plants found in this guide. Some recipes are specific for the edible wild plants indicated, but many also serve as basic formulas or ways to prepare many other edible wild plants. Any number of substitutions is possible. If you can't find one berry, another might do just as well. Part of the fun of "playing" with edible wild plants is seeing what works for you. Use your common sense and your creativity in the kitchen.

Many of these recipes are written in a casual, less formal style. Consider them to be closer to folk recipes, handed down from elders, rather than scientific formulas.

Wild Apples, Field to Table

Wild apples in the top branches of a tree

Wild apples on the ground, a little the worse for wear but still 90% good

Wild apples on the dehydrator, the best way to preserve a large quantity quickly

A fresh, delicious wild apple cake

SNACKS AND NIBBLES

A number of plants can be eaten out of hand, no processing required. Just pick, wash well, and eat. This includes such greens as wild garlic, wild leeks, young garlic mustard leaves, watercress, sheep sorrel, wood sorrel, chickweed, purslane, spearmint, and young sassafras leaves.

SALADS

There are two kinds of salads included here: greens salads and fruit salads.

Greens salads do not require cooking. Poke salad, or poke sallet, is a cooked green and not, as its name suggests, a raw salad green. Safe and tasty raw wild salad greens include watercress, peppergrass, chickweed, young field garlic leaves, wild leek leaves, and violet leaves and flowers.

For fruit salads, you can add any number of wild fruits. Some offer a distinctive flavor or texture, and some offer color or contrasting colors.

PICKLES

People pickle plants that have a crisp or crunchy texture. Underground parts, such as bulbs and fleshy roots, fit the bill here. So field garlic bulbs and the crisp and crunchy roots of Jerusalem artichokes make good pickles, as do the jointed, fleshy stalks of glasswort.

Jerusalem Artichoke Pickles

2 cups (475 ml) cider vinegar
1 cup (235 ml) water
¼ cup (50 g) sugar
1 tablespoon (18 g) salt
1 cup (150 g) scrubbed but unpeeled tubers

Bring to a boil the vinegar, water, sugar and salt. Place the tubers in a sterilized pint canning jar. Pour the boiling mixture over tubers and seal the jar. When the jar cools, refrigerate it and store one month before eating.

Wild Leek Pickles (Bulbs)

1 cup (235 ml) water
1 cup (235 ml) white vinegar
1 tablespoon (18 g) salt
2 tablespoons (26 g) sugar
2 cups (200 g) wild leek bulbs, cleaned

Combine the water, vinegar, salt, and sugar and bring to a boil.

Add the leek bulbs and boil gently for 2 minutes. Pour the cooked leek bulbs and pickling liquid into sterilized pint jar, filling it to the top. Let the jar cool, then place the lid on it and refrigerate. Wait as long as you can hold out before opening the jar, but at least two weeks. This will store well for at least six months.

Glasswort Pickles

½ cup (120 ml) water
½ cup (120 ml) white vinegar, preferably Japanese vinegar
1 cup (16 g) tender lengths of glasswort
1 teaspoon peppercorns

Combine the water, vinegar, and glasswort in a pot and bring to a boil. Simmer for 5 minutes. Place the peppercorns in a sterilized pint canning jar. Pour the glasswort and liquid into the jar. Let it cool, then refrigerate. Open the jar within a week and enjoy.

SOUPS

Soup is such an easy dish to make that it's a wonder not everybody makes his own. It's a comfort food the world around, often the main difference being whether it's served at the beginning or end of a meal. Most soups that are not meat based are greens based—what we call vegetable soup. They can also contain underground parts, such as bulbs—for example, onion soups. Greens soups are usually served hot, but some, like the lemony-tart sheep sorrel soup, can also be served chilled. There are also many fruit-based soups, popular in summer. These are best served chilled, and they make a good first course. A chilled sour cherry soup is standard fare in some Hungarian restaurants, for example. Making soup is a wonderful way to use edible wild plants.

Cream of Sheep Sorrel Soup

2 cups (110 g) sheep sorrel leaves, chopped
1 tablespoon (14 g) butter
2 cups (475 ml) broth
½ cup (120 ml) cream
1 egg yolk

Sauté the sheep-sorrel leaves in the butter and then set aside. In a pot, bring the broth to a boil, then remove from heat. Combine the cream and egg yolk in a separate dish. Whisk the cream mixture into the hot broth, then add the sautéed sheep-sorrel leaves. Heat the soup, but do not bring to a boil. Then serve, or chill and serve.

Stinging Nettle Soup

Wear garden or kitchen gloves when handling the nettle!

4 cups (950 ml) vegetable stock
1 quart (32 g) young stinging nettle shoots, snipped leaves and tender stalk tips only
Seasoning to taste

Bring the stock to a boil, then add nettle greens and simmer for 15 minutes. Season to taste. If the texture is not pleasing, you can puree the soup. Serve neat or with a dollop of sour cream.

Curly Dock Soup

1 quart (32 g) curly dock leaves
½ cup (120 ml) water
salt and pepper (to taste)
1 tablespoon (14 g) butter
¼ cup (60 ml) cream or 1 tablespoon (15 g) sour cream on top (optional)

Chop leaves and cook gently in the cup water for about 10 minutes. Purée leaves in a blender and add salt, pepper, and butter. Heat and eat. Add cream or sour cream, if desired.

Chilled Sour Cherry Soup

4 cups (950 ml) of sour cherry pulp, pitted
Water, as needed
Sugar to taste
Sour cream (optional)

Heat the sour cherry pulp, adding just enough water to keep it from burning at first. Add just enough sugar to taste, but not so much that it becomes sweet. Stir until well mixed, then chill. Serve cold with a spoonful of sour cream in each bowl, if you wish.

POTHERBS (COOKED GREENS)

The word *potherb* has fallen out of our language, but we make potherbs all the time. They're just greens that are cooked on the stovetop. These are usually cooked in a little water, drained, seasoned with salt and pepper, topped with a little butter, and served hot.

Many edible wild greens are perfectly suitable as potherbs. Our greens in the marketplace can be divided into those that are like spinach (mild), those that are like mustard greens (pungent or bitter), and those like garden sorrel (lemony in taste):

- Spinachlike: lamb's quarters, stinging nettle
- Pungent or bitter: wintercress, dandelion
- Lemony: sheep sorrel, curly dock, wood sorrel

There are also a few that require special treatment—such as boiling twice before eating—like pokeweed and milkweed.

Dandelion Greens

Use young dandelion greens, which are best in the early spring and when they reappear in the midfall. Some people will say dandelion greens are better if cooked in bacon grease—that the animal fat will act like a sugar to make the bitter pill go down. But don't fall for it! Dandelion greens are supposed to be somewhat bitter. Boiling all the bitterness out or concealing it misrepresents what dandelion is and offers.

A handful dandelion greens
Water, as needed

Place a handful of dandelion greens in a generous amount of water and boil for 5 minutes. Taste. If bitter, drain and repeat the boiling process. The drained, boiled dandelion greens can be eaten neat or with a dressing, or you can sauté them.

Milkweed Buds

2 quarts (1.9 L) water
1 quart (950 ml) cleaned milkweed buds

Bring the water to a boil, then add the milkweed buds and boil for 5 minutes. Drain the water. Place in another pot of fresh boiling water a minute or so. Drain. Serve neat, or with a butter or a lemon-butter sauce, salt, and pepper.

Wild Greens Quiche

1 9-inch (22.8-centimeter) pie crust (see the recipe for piecrust in the Juneberry recipe later in this chapter); bake in a 400°F (200°C, or gas mark 6) oven 15 minutes or until lightly golden brown)
1 quart (950 ml) processed spring greens (chickweed, lamb's quarters, dock, watercress, wintercress, and milkweed buds)
3 eggs
1 cup (100 g) grated cheese (Parmesan), plus 2 tablespoons (10 g) reserved for topping
1 cup (235 ml) milk
Salt and pepper, to taste

Place the processed wild greens into the pastry shell. In a bowl, beat the eggs and add the grated cheese and milk, plus salt and pepper. Blend and pour over the wild greens. Sprinkle the remaining Parmesan cheese on top. Bake in 375°F oven (190°C, or gas mark 5) for 30 minutes, or until the top appears set. Allow the quiche to cool before serving.

BREADS

Here are three distinct wild food breads: one made with flower pollen, one with nuts, and one a fruit and nut bread.

Sam's Persimmon–Black Walnut Bread

- 2 cups (475 ml) persimmon pulp
- 1 ½ cups (190 g) unsifted all-purpose flour
- 2 cups (275 g) whole-wheat flour
- 4 eggs
- 3 cups (600 g) sugar
- 1 cup (235 ml) vegetable oil
- 1 ½ teaspoons (9 g) salt
- 1 teaspoon (2 g) nutmeg (optional)
- 2 teaspoons (10 g) baking soda dissolved in 2/3 cup (157 ml) water
- 1 teaspoon (5 ml) vinegar
- ½ cup (60 g) black walnuts, chopped

Preheat the oven to 350°F (180°C, or gas mark 4). Place all ingredients except the walnuts in large mixing bowl, blend them, and then beat at high speed for 4 minutes. Add the walnuts and stir with a spoon until well mixed. Place in three greased loaf pans or one bundt pan (and one loaf pan, if needed) and bake for approximately one hour.

Cattail Pollen Bread

- 1 cup (120 g) cattail pollen, sifted
- 1 cup (137 g) all-purpose flour
- 2 tablespoons (26 g) sugar
- 2 ½ teaspoons (12 g) baking powder
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 1 egg, beaten
- 1 cup (235 ml) milk
- ¼ cup (56 g) butter, melted

Preheat oven to 400°F (200°C, or gas mark 6). Sift together the dry ingredients. In another bowl, mix the egg, milk, and butter, then add to dry ingredients and stir. (Do not beat.) Spoon the mixture into a greased pan. Bake for 25 minutes, or until the bread starts to pull away from edge of pan. Serve with butter or jam.

Acorn Bread

- 1 cup (140 g) acorn meal, finest powderlike grade*
- 1 cup (137 g) flour
- 4 (20 g) teaspoons baking powder
- ¼ cup (50 g) sugar
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ¼ cup (55 g) butter
- 1 egg
- 1 cup (235 ml) milk

Preheat the oven to 425°F (220°C, or gas mark 7). Sift together acorn meal, flour, baking powder, sugar, and salt. In a separate bowl, beat the egg, then add milk and butter. When the wet ingredients are well mixed, add them to the dry ingredients. Blend until smooth. Spoon and press into a greased 8- or 9-inch (20- to 22.8-centimeter) baking pan. Bake for about 20 minutes. The bread is done when the edges start to pull away from the sides of the pan.

***PREPARING ACORN MEAL:** Leave the acorns indoors for a few days before starting to make the meal. First, shell the acorns. Boil the shelled nuts, changing the water when it turns rusty in color. Continue to boil for at least 2 hours. Place the drained nuts on a cookie sheet in a 100°F (38°C) oven. When thoroughly dry, grind the nutmeats in a meat grinder. This will give you two grades of acorn meal: a fine powder (good for breads and muffins) and tiny, bone-hard pebbles (good for burgers).

BUTTERS

Greens, bulbs, fruits, and nuts can be worked into softened butter and combined with a mortar or a blender. These butters can be spread on bread or foods. Field garlic bulbs, mint leaves, and hazelnuts can be used to make delicious creamed butters.

Wild Garlic Butter

¼ pound (0.1 kg) butter, softened
6 field garlic bulbs, cleaned and pressed
1 tablespoon (2.5 g) field garlic leaves, finely diced

Cream the butter, then add the field garlic bulbs and leaves. Cream all the ingredients together. Mold the butter into a desired shape, place on wax paper, and chill.

SAUCES

Put simply, sauces are anything liquid that adds flavor to a dish. Wild garlic aioli is a kind of mayonnaise. Pesto sauces are the pureed greens of any number of plants and can be poured over a bowl of hot, steaming pasta. A salad dressing is just a piquant sauce poured over a fresh greens salad. A fruit sauce, such as one made with mayapples, is a tart one to spoon over ice cream or cake. (Fruit sauces are also often the result of a jelly that doesn't jell.)

Lamb's Quarters Pesto

1 cup (40 g) young and tender lamb's quarters shoots and leaves
Salt and pepper to taste
Vinegar or lemon juice to taste

Steam the greens quickly in a little water. Place the greens in a blender and puree. Season to taste.

Wild Garlic Aioli (Mayonnaise)

1 egg
2 tablespoons (30 ml) lemon juice
1 cup (235 ml) olive oil
6 large bulbs of field garlic, diced
½ teaspoon salt

Break the egg into a blender, then add the lemon juice, a ¼ cup (60 ml) of the olive oil, the bulbs, and salt. Cover and blend on low speed. While the blender is running, pour in the remaining oil slowly and steadily. When the mixture has thickened, turn up the speed and blend for 10 seconds.

Watercress Salad Dressing

2 cups (110 g) watercress, chopped
3 tablespoons (45 ml) lemon juice
½ cup (120 ml) olive oil
1 teaspoon salt
¼ teaspoon pepper

Combine all ingredients in a blender and puree. The dressing can either be chilled or made fresh as desired.

Wild Apple Vinaigrette Dressing

1 cup (110 g) peeled and sliced wild apples
¼ cup (60 ml) cider vinegar
¼ cup (60 ml) olive oil
½ teaspoon sugar
¼ teaspoon salt
Freshly ground black pepper

Place all the ingredients in a blender and pulse till smooth. Pour over a wild greens salad.

ENTRÉES

There are any number of edible wild plants that can serve as entrées. Usually, the plants are incorporated into a dish that is filling and can stand alone, or that can be accompanied by smaller side dishes.

Jerusalem Artichoke Croquettes

1 dozen Jerusalem artichoke tubers, scrubbed
1 cup (110 g) bread crumbs
1 egg yolk
1 cup (235 ml) vegetable oil
Salt, pepper, and herbs to taste

Bring the tubers to a boil in lightly salted water, just enough to loosen the skins. Drain the water. Slip the skins off and mash the softened tubers, then chill. Once they're cooled, shape the tubers into balls and dredge in the bread crumbs, then the egg, then the bread crumbs again. Fry in the oil at 375°F (190°C, or gas mark 5) until light golden brown. Dry on paper towels. Season to taste. Serve hot.

Acorn Burgers

2 cups (275 g) acorn "grits" (see the Acorn Bread recipe for notes on processing acorns)
2 cups (475 ml) water
1 medium onion, diced
1 egg
1 teaspoon salt
A drizzle of oil
Ground pepper
Hamburger buns (or English muffins), toasted

Soak acorn grits in water for 30 minutes, then drain. Combine the softened acorn grits, onion, egg, salt, and pepper in a bowl. Mix well and form burger patties. Place oil in a pan over medium heat for 1 minute, then add acorn burgers and cook for about 5 minutes on each side. Serve on a toasted bun with your favorite condiment.

Stuffed Skunk Cabbage

4 still-unopened cones skunk cabbage
½ cup (120 ml) olive oil
2 cups (320 g) onion, chopped
½ cup (95 g) uncooked rice
½ cup (30 g) parsley, chopped
½ cup (75 g) raisins
½ cup (75 g) pistachio nuts
¼ cup (65 g) tomato paste
1 cup (235 ml) water
¼ teaspoon allspice
¼ teaspoon cinnamon
¼ teaspoon pepper
1 teaspoon salt
2 cups (475 ml) broth

Process the skunk cabbage leaves* and set aside. In a skillet, heat the oil, add the onion, and cook gently until golden brown. Then add the rice and water and cook covered over low heat for 30 minutes, stirring occasionally. Add all the remaining ingredients except for the skunk cabbage and broth and cook 5 minutes. Strain the liquid into a casserole dish. Spread the skunk cabbage leaves, stuff them with the rice mixture, and the roll leaves over the rice to cover. Arrange the stuffed leaves in the casserole and weigh them down with a plate. Add the broth and simmer for 30 minutes in the oven before serving.

***TO PROCESS SKUNK-CABBAGE LEAVES:** Choose still-closed cones of leaves. Boil for 5 to 10 minutes in plenty of water and drain. Boil again in fresh water for another 5 to 10 minutes and drain. Repeat once more.

tip: The purpose of all this boiling is to rid the leaves of their calcium oxalate crystals that would otherwise inflame your mouth. Please try this recipe before you conclude that the effort is not worth it!

JELLIES AND JAMS

Making jams and jellies is a way to preserve fruit. Aside from the fruit, the other ingredient needed is sugar. For some fruit preserves to jell completely, you might also need to add pectin or a pectin-rich fruit, such as apple slices.

The difference between jams and jellies is that jams use the whole fruit and jellies use the strained juice of the fruit. You might think whole fruit is better, but if the seeds are bothersome or if the skin of the fruit is too tough, it's best to strain them out.

The amount of sugar needed to have an effective jelly depends on the fruit, but the basic recipe, without added pectin, is 4 cups (950 ml) of fruit pulp to 3 cups (600 g) of sugar. More sugar will be preferred by those who like a sweeter product. You can always reference your favorite recipes or cookbooks for additional, precise instructions.

Beach Plum Jam

4 cups (950 ml) beach plum pulp
Water, as needed
3 cups (600 g) sugar

Place the beach plum pulp in a pot and add just enough water to wet the bottom of the pot. Pour in the sugar. Bring the mixture slowly to a boil and boil for about 15 minutes—or until a candy thermometer reaches the jell stage, or until you can dip a spoon dipped into the pot, tilt it, and have the run-off congeals together. Pour into sterilized jars and place lids on top, with the screw caps lightly turned. When you hear the *pop* of the suction anchoring the lids to the jar rims, tighten the screw caps. The jam is ready to eat when you are.

Elderberry Jelly

2 quarts (1.9 L) elderberries
1 cup (235 ml) water
3 cups (600 g) sugar
1 lemon, juiced

Stem and crush the berries, and then put them in a pot. Add the water and bring to a boil, then simmer for 15 minutes. Strain and measure the juice. To 4 cups (950 ml) of juice, add the sugar and lemon and bring to a hard boil without stirring until a candy thermometer reaches 225°F (110°C, or gas mark ½). Pour into sterilized jars. (Note: Not everything jells all the time. If this doesn't, use it as a sauce over cake or ice cream.) Yields about 2 ½ pints (1.2 L).

PIES AND TARTS

The purpose of a piecrust is to contain the fruit or filling. It should hold together, and it should taste good, as well, but it doesn't need to be made with butter or lard. Most crusts taste better if made with butter or lard, and you might prefer the texture of these crusts to those made with vegetable oil. Remember that you're not using fruit to adorn a piecrust; you're using the crust as a container for the fruit. Try to keep things in perspective. That said, an oil-based piecrust is very easy to make, and no one eating a wild berry pie made with an oil-based crust ever passes up a second helping.

Mulberry Pie

1 pie crust (top and bottom; see the recipe given for Serviceberry Pie)
4 cups (580 g) mulberries
1 lemon, juiced
1 cup (145 g) white raisins (optional)
1 cup (200 g) sugar
½ cup (63 g) flour
Butter

Fill the bottom of the piecrust with the berries and add the lemon juice. Add the raisins, if you're using them. In a separate bowl, mix together the sugar and flour and sprinkle it over the top. Dot top of the pie with butter and cover it with the top crust. Bake at 400°F (200°C or gas mark 6) for 45 minutes or until the edges brown and start to pull away. Let cool before serving.

Serviceberry Pie

Serviceberry Pie

For the crust:
2 cups (250 g) flour
1 teaspoon salt
¼ cup (60 ml) cold milk
½ cup (120 ml) vegetable oil

For the filling:
2 quarts (1.9 L) serviceberries, cleaned of stems
½ cup (75 g) white raisins (optional)
¼ cup (50 g) sugar
¼ cup (31 g) flour
1 tablespoon (14 g) butter

Preheat the oven to 400°F (200°C or gas mark 6). To make the crust, first make a dough by mixing the flour and salt. Add the cold milk and vegetable oil to the flour and mix. Divide dough in half and shape two round balls. Place a dampened piece of wax paper on the table or counter. Set a dough ball on this and cover with a second piece of wax paper. Using a rolling pin, roll out the dough until it's flat. Remove the top piece of wax paper, lift the dough, and fit it into a 9-inch (23-centimeter) glass pie plate. If the crust breaks, piece it back together by hand. Now roll out the second ball of dough the same way and set aside.

Fill the pie plate and crust with the serviceberries. Add a top layer of white raisins, if you're using them. Top with a light covering of sugar and thin pats of butter. Now add the top layer of rolled-out dough. Again, if it breaks, piece it back together. Crimp the edges of the pie dough. Pierce the top crust liberally. (You could also make strips to cover the pie, but a single, perforated piece is easier and quicker.)

Bake for 45 minutes or until the edges of the pie brown. The filling might start to bubble up through the piercings. Let cool before serving.

PUDDINGS, COMPOTES, AND GELATINS

Concoctions or dishes can start out as something else and fail, and sometimes the dish can be salvaged as a pudding. Certain puddings, such as rice puddings, can be flavored with edible wild plants.

Compotes are mixtures of different foods, such as nuts, spices, and sugar, often served in a syrup like base. Japanese knotweed-strawberry compote is made much as one would make rhubarb-strawberry compote.

Gelatins are foods held suspended in a gel, which is something some seaweeds can make happen. Irish moss contains carrageenan and kelps contain alginate, both substances that the food industry uses to bind some foods and keep others, like ice cream, from separating.

Calamus (Sweet Flag) Rice Pudding

1 tablespoon (7 g) calamus rhizome, finely grated
2 cups (330 g) cooked brown rice
2 ½ (590 ml) cups milk
3 eggs
½ cup (170 g) honey
¼ teaspoon salt

Preheat the oven to 350°F (180°C or gas mark 4). Stir the calamus rhizome into the cooked rice. Mix together the milk, eggs, honey, and salt, and pour over rice mix. Stir everything together and pour the mixture into a buttered baking dish. Bake for 45 minutes, or until pudding is set. Serve as is, or with whipped cream or hard sauce.

Japanese Knotweed–Strawberry Compote

2 cups (500 g) Japanese knotweed tops, cut crosswise into ½-inch (1.3-cm) pieces (the top 6 inches [15 cm] only)
1 cup (145 g) strawberries
½ cup (100 g) sugar
1 teaspoon lemon juice
water to cover bottom of pot

Combine all the ingredients in a pot and bring to a boil. Simmer for 10 to 15 minutes, occasionally stirring and mashing the mixture. Pour the mix into bowl and let cool. Refrigerate and serve chilled.

Giant Kelp Lemon Gelatin

1 cup (225 g) giant kelp (dried, crumbled)
1 quart (950 ml) water
2 lemons, juiced
1 cup (340 g) honey

Add the kelp to the water and bring to a boil. Simmer for one hour, reducing the liquid by one quarter. Strain out the kelp. Add to the liquid the juice of 2 lemons and one cup of honey. Bring to a boil and boil lightly until it forms a coating on the pot, about 20 minutes. Pour into a container and let cool so that it jells. Refrigerate.

FROZEN DESSERTS

Sorbets are frozen fruit desserts. Sherbets and ice cream are similar but contain dairy products. Both are relatively easy to make, even without special equipment.

Gooseberry or Currant Sorbet

2 cups (300 g) gooseberries or currants
½ cup (100 g) sugar
Water, as needed

Place the fruit and sugar in just enough water so the fruit doesn't burn and bring to a boil, just enough to soften the fruit. Stir and mash the fruit as it heats in the pot. Strain the mixture using a food mill, so that the seeds, skins, and ends are kept back. Let the strained juice cool.

Place the juice in an ice cream maker and follow the instructions. And presto! You have gooseberry or currant sorbet.

Old-Fashioned (Caribbean) Ice Cream

No ice cream maker needed

1 container condensed milk
3/4 cup (175 ml) water
2 cups (475 ml) of any fruit pulp (e.g., beach plum, mayapple, mulberries, persimmon, prickly pear)

Mix the condensed milk and water. Beat the evaporated milk till thick and fold into condensed milk. Add the fruit pulp and put into the freezer until it starts to freeze. Spoon into a bowl and beat the mixture until creamy, then place in ice-cube trays and freeze.

BEVERAGES

Beverages can be made with edible wild plant leaves, flowers, fruits, and roots, depending on where the flavor is in a particular plant. In sumac, it's in the fruit. In linden, it's the flower. In mint, it's the leaves. In sassafras, it's the root. Sumac-ade is not cooked. Mint tea, like most leaf teas, is steeped. Sassafras root tea is boiled to extract the flavor.

Sumac Lemonade

4 large red sumac cones
1 quart (950 ml) water
Sugar to taste

Combine the sumac cones and water in a jar. Tighten the lid and shake for 10 to 15 minutes. Strain the liquid and add sugar to taste. Drink once chilled. (Some people prefer to add a liquor to this, but this lemonadelike drink is perfect by itself on a hot summer day.)

Mint Tea

1 handful mint leaves per cup
Boiling water, as needed
Sugar to taste

Collect mint leaves whenever available. Place one handful per cup and pour boiling water over the leaves. Let steep, then sweeten to taste. Drink hot or let cool and refrigerate. On a hot summer day, iced mint tea cools you down like nothing else.

Pineapple-Weed Tea

1 cup (235 ml) water
1 tablespoon (1.5 g) pineapple-weed flowers
Sugar to taste

Bring water to a boil. Pour into a cup, add pineapple weed flowers, and cover. Steep for 10 minutes. Add sugar or sweetener to taste.

tip: You can chop up the whole plant and use it all rather than just the flowers. The flavor will be similar but a bit herby.

Linden Flower Tea

1 handful of linden flowers* per cup
Boiling water, as needed
Basswood honey to taste

Place one large handful of linden flowers per cup and pour boiling water over them. Cover for 5 minutes or so. Sweeten as desired with basswood honey.

*Collect linden flowers when fully opened and on a dry day. Dry on paper towels or ventilated trays before using.

tip: Basswood is the name of the American linden tree. The most fragrant linden is the European silver linden, a common street and park tree in north temperate cities.

Rose-Hip Tea

1 tablespoon rose hips,* chopped
Boiling water as needed
Sugar to taste

Pour one cup of boiling water over one tablespoon of chopped rose hips (with or without seeds). Let steep 15 minutes, strain, and sweeten to taste.

*After collecting rose hips, lay them out to dry on paper towels or ventilated trays. The bigger the hip the better since some are just a thin red skin over tasteless seeds. The seaside rose is a good choice for collecting your rose hips, if available (see page 65).

Sassafras Tea

Drink in moderation.

About 3 8- to 12-inch (20.32-centimeter to 30.48-centimeter) sassafras roots, cleaned
Water

Boil the sassafras roots in a large pot of water until the water becomes a rusty brown color. Let cool slightly before drinking. Sweeten to taste.

Beach plum tart

SEASONAL MENUS

The plants listed here are those available for use throughout the Northern Hemisphere during the season cited. With some exceptions, such as a few of the berries and nuts, like serviceberry pie and acorn burgers, all the plant foods listed here are available in the temperate zone of the Southern Hemisphere, too. A winter menu is not included only because it can be too arduous to collect fresh wild plant foods over the winter. On the other hand, preserved wild plant foods, such as pickled wild garlic or leek bulbs, frozen berries, jams, dried mint, and stored nuts can be brought out for a wild edible winter celebration.

Spring

- Mixed Wild Greens Salad with Watercress Dressing
- Stinging Nettle Soup
- Dandelion Greens
- Wild Greens Quiche
- Wild Leek Pickles
- Japanese Knotweed–Strawberry Compote
- Mint Tea

Summer

- Chilled Sour Cherry Soup
- Cattail Pollen Bread
- Purslane Greens
- Lamb's Quarters Pesto (for pasta)
- Glasswort Pickles
- Serviceberry Pie
- Gooseberry or Currant Sorbet
- Linden Tea

Autumn

- Mixed Wild Greens Salad with Wild Garlic Aioli
- Curly Dock Soup
- Jerusalem Artichoke Croquettes
- Acorn Burgers
- Sam's Persimmon–Black Walnut Bread
- Beach Plum Jam
- Rose Hip Tea

GLOSSARY

ROOT TYPES

Roots are primarily the underground parts of plants that stabilize the plant, allow for water and nutrients to enter it, and store food overwinter. There are a number of different kinds of roots or root parts referred to in this guide.

Bulbs: The familiar onion has a bulb, a many layered food-storage structure. (See page 108 for an example.)

Rhizome: The horizontal underground stem of plants from which new plants emerge. Cattail (page 106), for example, has a tangled mat of underground rhizomes. The roots are the thin cord-like parts attached to the rhizomes. Sweet flag (Acorus calamus) (page 112) has a spicy-aromatic rhizome that we use as a seasoning by grating it.

Tap root: The vertical root, as on a carrot, that you find in trees (sassafras, page 154) or weeds (dandelion, page 122).

Tubers: The swollen ends of roots or root-like extensions underground. Daylily (page 113) has a cluster of solid, white-fleshed, starch-filled tubers.

LEAF TYPES

Leaves are where food (sugars) is made by the plant. Leaf appearance on a plant is not random. There's a leaf pattern in every plant, designed to enhance its ability to receive light from the sun.

Alternate: The placement of leaves on a plant can be opposite each other or alternating along the stem of the plant. Cherry (page 73) has an alternate leaf arrangement.

Compound: A leaf composed of leaflets is called compound. The leaf is recognized by the bud that develops between the leaf base and the plant stem. The leaflets are usually in opposite pairs, except for the presence of a single terminal leaflet. Hickory trees (page 61) have compound leaves. So do poison ivy, poison oak, and poison sumac (page 163).

Opposite: Plants that have leaves that are opposite each other on a plant stem can be either simple or compound. Opposite simple leaves include dogwood (page 92). Opposite compound leaves include elderberry (page 90).

Simple: A single leaf attached to a plant stem that, in woody plants, can be recognized most easily by looking for the bud, or often tiny projection that develops at the meeting place of a leaf and a stem. A cherry tree has simple leaves (page 73).

Toothed: Leaves have edges, and these edges can either be smooth or toothed (or serrated), such as apple (page 80) or cherry leaves (page 73).

FRUIT TYPES

Fruits are that part of a plant that contains the seeds. Fruits are designed to be dispersed, either by attracting an animal to consume it and excrete its seeds, or because it's lightweight and attached to something easily blown about by the wind. There are fleshy, juicy fruits, such as berries of various kinds, and there are fruits that are podlike, such as legumes, and there are fruits that produce dry seeds attached to parachute-like wind-borne devices for dispersal.

Berry: Despite their familiar common names, strawberries (page 67) and raspberries (page 69) are not "true" berries, whereas blueberries (page 84) are, as are grapes (page 88), gooseberries (page 99), currants (page 99), and even persimmons (page 97). Botanical "berries" include the tomato, which is why the botanical definition of a berry is so confusing.

Drupe: Although not every single-seeded fruit is a drupe, the stone fruits are, and these are the familiar cherries and plums (page 73) and orchard fruits such as peaches. Blackberries and raspberries (page 69) are called multiple drupes because they are composed of a fused cluster of drupes, each tiny, fleshy part contains a seed, like a cherry.

Hip: Rose hips (page 65) are unusual-looking fruits. They are fleshy, brightly colored, cup-shaped, berry-like structures enclosing a number of "seeds." Actually, the seeds are the fruits of the rose, and these are the fuzzy, stick-in-the-throat structures (technically, achenes) that enclose the real seeds. The part of the rose hip eaten is the fleshy part, not the fuzzy achenes, which must be removed when making rose hip soup or jam.

Pome: Apples (page 80), pears (page 100), quince, even serviceberries (page 78), are pomes; that is, they are fleshy coverings about the centrally contained seeds.

THORNS, SPINES, PRICKLES, AND STINGING HAIRS

Plants can't run away and hide from predators. Instead, some produce, internally, an array of poisons or bitter substances to prevent animals from eating them, while others produce external means of protection, like thorns, spines, prickles, and stinging hairs.

Prickles: These are an irregular arrangement of small, sharp extensions along a plant stem, which you find on roses and brambles, including blackberries (page 69).

Spines: These are modified leaves, often small but irritating when touched, like those you find on cactus pads.

"Stinging" hairs: These are found all along the stem and leaves of plants including stinging nettle. These fragile hairs break off when touched, penetrate the skin like a hypodermic needle, and inject a skin-irritating, though short-lasting, chemical.

Thorns: These are modified short branches that produce hard, sharp points, such as Hawthorn.

FLOWER MORPHOLOGY

It might appear that every flower is different, but simple observation will show you that there are some regular features of flowers endlessly repeated throughout the flowering world. One group has flowers that are either three or six-parted. These include the lilylike plants, such as daylily. Nearly all of the plants in this guide have flowers belonging to the other group of flowering plants, those that have four or five petals.

Bracts: These are modified leaves that appear to be petals, and they are intended to attract pollinators. The true flower petals are often too small to notice, such as those in dogwoods (page 92).

Petals: These are the colorful, showy parts of the flower, often arranged in a wheellike pattern such as you find in cherries; or arranged in a pattern where the left and right side are mirror images, but the top and bottom are not, such as you typically find in mints.

Pistils: These are the female parts of the flower. The top of the pistil, called the stigma, receives pollen, which is then transformed into a device that travels down through the pistil, enters the plant's ovary, and fertilizes the waiting egg. This produces an embryo that grows into a seed, the next generation.

Raceme: This refers to a particular kind of branching pattern of flowers and fruits. Racemes, such as those found in black cherries and chokecherries (page 73), produce their flowers and subsequent fruits on short stems along a main, fingerlike structure. Other cherries, for example the sweet and sour cherries, produce corymbs, or a broadly somewhat flattened branching structure with shorter and longer stems.

Stamens: These are the male parts of the flower. The top of the stamen contains pollen, the male reproductive structure.

RESOURCES

BOOKS

While there are dozens of books available on edible wild plants, all but a few of these are restricted to the plants of a particular locality or country. Among these, there is none better than the ones Euell Gibbons wrote in the 1970s, the "Stalking the Wild Asparagus" series.

Cornucopia II: A Source Book of Edible Plants by Stephen Facciola, Kampong Publications, Vista, 1998, is the best single volume available on how to purchase many of the plants described in this book.

The two best books on the cooking of edible wild plants are Elizabeth Schneider's *Vegetables from Amaranth to Zucchini* and the classic *Joy of Cooking.* Nearly every recipe you might want to use for any wild plant can be found in this book, either under the plant's name, or by substituting the wild plant for a cultivated relative. After all, there are only so many ways to cook spinach before turning a cook into a kitchen slave.

WEBSITES

There are a great many websites that discuss and illustrate edible wild plants. Some of these include video clips on how to identify and prepare these plants. Many of these offer useful ways to proceed with a plant you are interested in learning about. Because there is no regulation of these sites, it is not possible to know how accurate or inaccurate the information might be. Mistakes can occur at either end. In addition, even if the information is accurate, it is not necessarily complete. Skin rashes from handling plants, or illness from ingesting plants that have not been properly prepared or consumed in quantities that are too large or too frequent, are not always included in books and websites on edible wild plants.

Use online resources at your discretion, and always validate your findings with other sources.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Some people seem to be born knowing about edible wild plants, but most of us must learn about them somehow or other. I didn't learn about them until I moved to New York City. Bicycling out to JFK airport, at first unaware that we were on a highway that was closed to bicycle traffic, my wife Irene (then my girlfriend) and I were going to the Aer Lingus terminal to weigh our bikes for a trip to Ireland. Hugging the grassy strip between the fast moving car lanes, we encountered field garlic (*Allium vineale*), something Irene knew about but I did not. I thought it was a plant that had escaped from a nearby farm. She knew it was a wild plant, and an edible one, at that.

Our subsequent trip bicycling around Ireland and England opened up a whole world of edible wild plants to us, as well as people's understanding of them. For example, we were warned in Ireland—and by teenagers, not old-timers—not to eat the wild blackberries that we saw fruiting in profusion along the roadsides. The reason for not eating them was not because they were poisonous, but because the thorny plant was believed to be the "crown of thorns" Jesus wore on the cross, and the juice of the fruit was said to be the blood of Christ! How many other reasons are out there for not doing something that has nothing to do with the physical safety of the endeavor?

A year or so later, James Trager, a freelance writer, was commissioned by *Family Magazine* to write an article about Euell Gibbons, the guru of edible wild plants. Jim's wife, Chie Nishio, a professional photographer, would illustrate. I met Jim and Chie on a mushroom hunt in the woods outside New York City. Jim invited me to join them on their trip. Euell Gibbons proved to be as enjoyable in person as he was to read. We spent a day or so foraging about for edible wild plants, which we then brought back to his kitchen to prepare for our meals. He knew where everything grew, how to identify each, and what the best way was to prepare something good to eat with each kind of plant we found. Meeting him brought his books to life; we could see him collecting cattails, horseradish, lamb's quarters, and sassafras. We needed something for dessert, but edible berries weren't in season yet. He went to his freezer to retrieve a container of mayapple pulp, which he then baked into a pie. This was the inspiration for a book of our own.

At that time there were no edible wild plant books with color photographs, only drawings, as in Euell's books, and black-and-white photos in some of the others. Chie and I decided that someday we would collaborate on the book you are holding now.

The difference between what we had originally intended to do and what we have now done is that so many of our edible wild plants are now available in our markets, and some are already in our homes. Learning about them and actually getting them is much easier today than it was in Euell's time. There's no need to be an armchair forager anymore. The goods are available on demand.

I've been teaching courses on plant identification and use at the New York Botanical Garden for several decades. Every class I teach, whatever the course title, is about edible wild plants and mushrooms. Our cultivated plants are not that many generations removed from the wild, and what we can learn about how wild plants grow and thrive under often adverse conditions can inform us about how to grow their cultivated relatives. Even if we continue to call them "weeds," wild plants, at least the greens, are the weeds we encounter every day of our lives, in our flowerboxes, in our yards, along our sidewalks, even between the cracks in the sidewalk, so they are an integral part of our lives. Many of them are edible, as eminently edible as anything purchased in markets, and this is what I teach my students, and what we are offering you in this guide.

I especially want to thank Rochelle Bourgault, Tiffany Hill, Jennifer Grady, Regina Grenier, Cora Hawks, and Winnie Prentiss at Quarry Books for all their help and support and encouragement in the production of this book.

Also, I want to thank Dianna Smith, who contributed in a major way by digitizing a large folder of slides for this project, and helped get us off the ground and running.

Finally, I want to thank my wife, Irene, who got me started on this endlessly fascinating quest to find edible wild plants at home and around the world, and to continually find new ways to enjoy them.

SEASONAL, MOVEABLE FEAST

Having learned all the ins and outs of edible wild plants, and wondering just how many people edible wild plants could feed, Irene and I ran a six-month, once-a-week, edible wild plant dinner, from April through September, for about 25 guests each evening. This was a learning experience and a full-time endeavor, requiring three days to find and gather all the plants needed, two days to prepare everything, the day of the event, and a day to recover and clean up before the start of a new week of gathering. From the appearance of the first greens in the spring, through a seemingly endless succession of summer berries, to a series of nut breads and root dishes and beverages in the autumn, anything and everything that was edible and could be gathered and served as a tasty food was harvested, cleaned, and prepared as salads, soups, entrees, breads, jams, desserts, and beverages to feed those who came to eat foods they never had before. And most returned week after week throughout the season.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The author (right) with forager Euell Gibbons on a forage in the 1970s.

Gary Lincoff, author of *The Complete Mushroom Hunter,* teaches botany at The New York Botanical Garden in New York City. One of his most popular courses is on ethnobotany, or the ways in which different cultures use plants for food, medicine, shelter, clothing, adornment, and spiritual enlightenment. He has also organized and led group tours to more than thirty countries on six continents to study native plants and mushrooms.

Gary is featured in the documentary film *Know Your Mushrooms*, and he has appeared on the *The Martha Stewart Show*, as well as in a front-page story in the *New York Times* (10/22/2011). He is also the author of the *Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Mushrooms*, as well as several other books. Visit his website, www.GaryLincoff.com, for seasonal "highlights," appearances, and uses of edible wild plants and mushrooms and to follow along with him in his pursuit of *The Joy of Foraging.*

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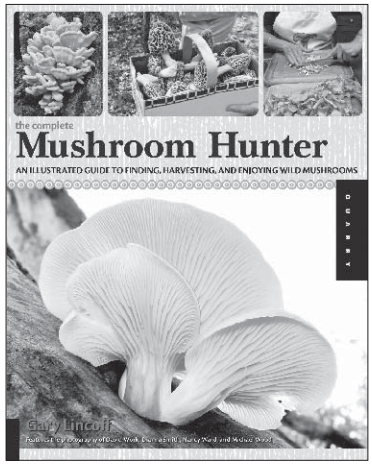

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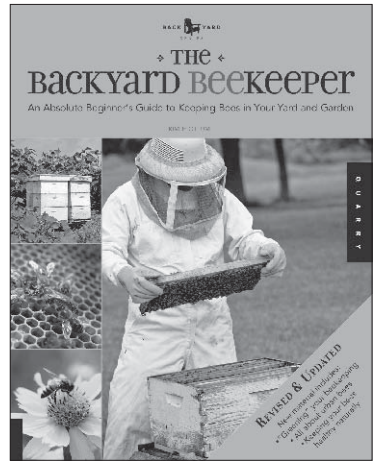

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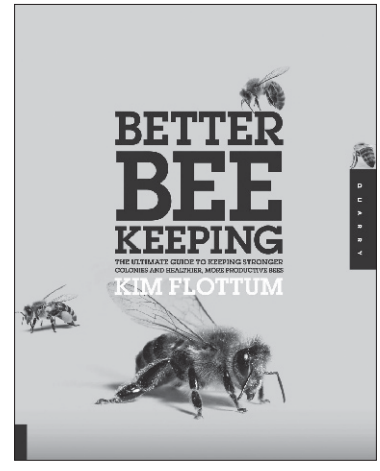

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